Thinking Through Srivijaya: Polycentric Networks in Traditional Southeast Asia

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The story of Srivijaya begins with a geopolitical preface. Just as all roads once led to Rome, so too maritime trade in Asia converged on the narrow sea route that became known as the Strait of Malacca. Unlike ancient Rome, however, the Malacca Strait has retained its geographical salience at different times in history. One such era was well conveyed by the sixteenth century Portuguese adventurer, Tomé Pires, who wrote shortly after his country's acquisition of the port city of Malacca: "Whoever is lord of Malacca has his hands on the throat of Venice" (Courtesao 1944). Five centuries later, similar sentiments transpire; only the actors and their cargoes have changed. The lucrative spice trade that enabled the maritime republic of Venice to acquire wealth and power has been replaced by access to energy upon which modern economies depend, not least of which the world's premier trading nation – the People's Republic of China (PRC, China). With 80 percent of its imported oil passing through the Strait of Malacca, a chokepoint over which the PRC has no control, it is understandable that President Hu Jintao spoke in 2003 of the "Malacca dilemma" (US DoD 2005). In view of China's vulnerability to having this maritime lifeline severed, Hu Jintao's successor, Xi Jinping, has refocused on the "maritime silk road" and the importance of regional "connectivity" [1] (Wu and Zhao 2013; APEC 2014). This not only serves to promote regional prosperity but in light of the "Malacca dilemma" offers a strategic expedient in the vicinity of such a vital sea line of communication.

As the shortest sea passage between the Pacific Ocean in the East and the Indian Ocean in the West, and flanked on one side by the Malay Peninsula and the other by the island of Sumatra, the 805-kilometer long Strait of Malacca is the busiest of archipelagic Southeast Asia's passageways – the others being the Sunda and Lombok-Makassar straits. The latter are deeper and wider but less direct and therefore more expensive for commercial shipping. All are part of the sovereign territory of today's Indonesia, with the exception of the Malacca Strait whose sovereignty Indonesia shares with the other two littoral states, Singapore and Malaysia. There was a time, however, when this vital sea passage and its surrounding lands were part of a vast "empire," not necessarily like Rome with a single political and administrative center but more in keeping with a regional format of polycentric networks that will be discussed below. It, too, might have been a tripartite arrangement of polities along the Malacca Strait, or a wider confederation, presenting itself under a single name for trade purposes with the Chinese court.

Empire, like security, may take many forms. Such an approach allows consideration of an early manifestation of Southeast Asian regionalism, that of the Sriviyajan "empire" that emerged in the seventh century and lasted in recognizable form at least until the eleventh. For this reason it is important to "think through" the manner in which Srivijaya operated and whether in doing so the networked past might be able to serve the global present by providing an alternative perspective. To facilitate our task, we turned to two eminent sinologists who also dealt with "other voices;" indeed, a leading voice from the Chinese past, that of Confucius.

We adopted the term "thinking through" Srivijaya from the book by David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, which sought to "achieve relative clarity with regard to the principal issues in Confucius' thought" and "provide an exercise in *thinking* using Confucius' philosophy as medium" (1987, 6, emphasis in the original). Insofar as the conceptual parameters of pre-modern Southeast Asian thought may be deemed as alien to people today as those of ancient China, then our work is similarly inspired. However, Srivijaya compounds the arduous endeavor of "thinking through" its complexities because its existence as a polity is less well documented than China's and its contours still subject to debate. To *think through* the Srivijayan "riddle" is to look not only at the archaeological and historical evidence or weigh up scholarly theories; it is to take the next step of identifying insights that may be congruent with twenty-first century global regionalism. In embarking on such a quest, it behoves the academic time-traveller to think, to the extent that it is possible, from the perspective of this archipelagic regional power; one which participated not in the Western state system with which we are familiar but in a geo-cosmological order derived from Sino-Indic influence. In the end, Hindu-Buddhist ritual and its power, together with Chinese rites (of which Confucianism was the major influence) of proper relations, bring thoughts of the world of Confucius and that of Srivijaya into mutual focus. In "thinking through" Srivijaya, it is important to put aside conventional ideas of ethnicity and nationality, state sovereignty and territorial boundaries, as well as international relations and legal conventions. Instead, preoccupations with spiritual power, ritual competence, prestige, royal lineage, oaths of loyalty and deterrent curses (see McKinnon 1985) are associated with the Srivijayan era. These coexist with a reputation for cosmopolitism born of trade and an associated diplomatic awareness of the wider world. Little wonder that in lieu of a "state," "kingdom" or "empire," the Indic term "mandala" was reintroduced in some Western accounts to describe such political formations – a subject to which we will return. First, however, we will *think through* what we do not know about Srivijaya, as this predicates much of what we do know or think we know – based on a small amount of extant evidence.

1. *Thinking Through* **what do we do not know about Srivijaya**

Remarkably, our knowledge of Srivijaya emerged only in the early twentieth century when the French scholar Georges Coedès (1918) pieced together evidence of Srivijaya's existence. Others had been working around this idea but had not achieved a breakthrough. A clear problem was an absence of clues. Certainly the tropical climate and use of perishable construction materials were not conducive to the preservation of material culture. Fortunately

for posterity, nine inscriptions on stone were found in Sumatra testifying to Srivijaya's existence: for example, the Kedukan Bukit Inscription, which was discovered in 1920 in the Palembang area and dated at 683 CE hailed a "Great, prosperous and peaceful Srivijaya" (see Zakharov 2009, 8; De Casparis 1956). It is from these inscriptions, written in the Old Malay language which contained Sanskrit loan-words, that we have the name "Srivijaya." *Sri* means "radiant" but is also a royal honorific; *vijaya* translates as victory or excellence. The presence of Sanskrit was not unusual in view of the spread of Indian cultural influence in Southeast Asia early in the Common Era. This was largely due to local rulers adopting the high culture of Hinduism for prestige rather than any concerted effort on India's part to colonize the region (Hall 1984, 68; Wolters 1999:108-111). Military expeditions and conquests in the eleventh century by the South Indian Tamil forces occurred well after the region adopted Hindu-Buddhist culture and were not decisive in its religious leanings.

Despite its cultural inheritance, much of what we know about Srivijaya comes not from "mother India" but imperial China with its dedicated record-keeping and with whom Srivijaya had closer political relations. Still, such records by non-Srivijayans do present another set of problems. Besides knowledge of Srivijaya being mediated by the experiences and expectations of external actors – the obvious one is the name by which Srivijaya was known to others. Much can potentially be lost in conceptual translation from the name found in the Old Malay epigraphy of the seventh century to the languages of traders and scribes living beyond the time and place of the inscribed "Radiant Victory" – Srivijaya. Tang dynasty (618-907) records called this southern source of much valued resins and spices, Shilifoshi. Later, under the Song dynasty (960–1279), Srivijaya was known as the tribute-bearing kingdom of Sanfoqi, while in Arabic it was often called Sribuza (So 1998, 295; Taylor 2003) or Zabaj when Srivijaya was viewed as a region inclusive of Java (Laffan 2005, 67). For Indian traders it was identified with Sumatra and its gold; hence the name Suvaranadvipa (The Golden Isle). Even in Indonesian, the name Srivijaya is not quite what it used to be: the Sanskrit *v* has over time indigenized into a Javanese *w*, becoming Sriwijaya.

What was the lifespan of Srivijaya? This depends on how it is conceived and what it is called. According to an authority on Srivijaya, John N. Miksic (2015), Srivijaya was founded a few years before 680 CE. It lost its monopoly on trade after having been attacked by Chola (Cola) dynasty forces from southern India in 1025 CE. Thereafter, Miksic notes, the name Srivijaya never appears in any primary source. The most frequently cited endpoint, however, is 1288 when Srivijaya was absorbed by its East Javanese rival, Singosari. But as Srivijaya was commonly referred to by other names, depending on the identity of the external observer, there are further possibilities as to the dates of its demise. Thus one of the Chinese dynastic histories, the *Mingshi*, reported the decline and disappearance of Sanfoqi in the fourteenth century (Sumio 2006, 1). While dynastic histories of China are not a direct or necessarily accurate reflection of the political dynamics of other entities, they do present clues. The "san," for instance, meaning "three" in Sanfoqi suggests that there were Three Vijayas (Wolters 1999, 27; Laffan 2005, 18; Suzuki 2014). This would mean that Srivijaya/Sanfoqi was not necessarily a single entity represented by one royal court but would have comprised at least three strong centers. Possible candidates for these "champion centers" were the

Sumatran kingdom of Melayu with its capital at Jambi, Kedah on the Malay Peninsula and Chaiya on the eastern side of the Isthmus of Kra (Suzuki 2014), each of which would have their attendant dependencies; or perhaps the three were the Sumatran-based centers of Palembang, Jambi, and Minangkabau (Kozok 2004, citing a fourteenth century document from Sumatra, the Tanjung Tanah Manuscript). While it is still possible to have one king above three, and a Khmer one at that – Wolters (1999, 27 citing Barth and Bergaigne 1885, 46) gives the example of "a Khmer ruler in the early seventh century" being eulogized as "the glorious sovereign of three kings" – Srivijaya may have been nothing more than "a shifting riverine zone of entrepôts that could coalesce for mutual interest" (Laffan 2005, 14). It is indeed feasible that the Srivijayan "empire" was a collective unit which would have experienced a change in composition and power distribution over the centuries of its existence. This means that Srivijaya not only had an uncertain lifespan of between four and seven centuries; but that there was probably more than one Vijaya territorially and temporally.

2. *Thinking Through* Srivijaya's mistaken identity

This raises the question of whether Srivijaya's existence was a case of mistaken identity. What was its actual status in the lexicon of political constructs? Was it an "empire," confederation or something else? It has even been described as a mix of political formations: a "trade-based city-state empire" comparable to fifteenth-to-seventeenth century Venice (Chase-Dunn *et al.* 2013). The combination of a small-scale "city-state" with the expanse of "empire," especially when based on trade, may clarify matters but the *thinking through* part requires an understanding of its inner logic. Srivijaya – like other early Southeast Asian ruling entities – was a loosely based polity with changes in allegiance a regular feature, and therefore shifting territorial borders were not unusual. The Chinese pilgrim Yijing (I-ching, 635-713), who journeyed to Srivijaya twice (see below), employed the term "guo" ("country") to describe Srivijaya; it is the same term used for its powerful predecessor (and possible ancestor in terms of royal lineage) further north on mainland Southeast Asia, the Khmer polity of Funan (100–545 CE). Yet Funan, like Srivijaya, was not a straightforward country/state or "guo" in the Western or Chinese sense. Funan has been shown to be "a conglomerate of chiefdoms but not a state" (Zakharov 2009, 4, citing research by Jacques 1979), though this does not discount the possibility of Funan with its centuries of existence (similar to Srivijaya) going through periods of unification and fragmentation. One scholar, Fukami Sumio (2006, 1-2), attests to Srivijaya being a collection of states in the Malacca region that stretched from the Malay peninsula across to Sumatra and West Java at the very least, before the kingdom of Malacca arose at about 1400.

Yet the dominant narrative holds that Srivijaya was a maritime empire or "thalassocracy" (rule by control of the sea) with a single seat of power. This description works up to a point. While relying on maritime trade for its wealth, Srivijaya limited its control to the straits within its immediate vicinity, rather than the Indian Ocean or the South China Sea. These were plied by traders from many lands. So Srivijaya could function as a maritime power without having to control the seas, only the straits where it imposed tariffs on commercial

shipping, and the hinterlands from which valuable forest products were derived. Thalassocracy as a description also fails to account for the equally compelling rule by spiritual charisma, or what Wolters (1999, 112) called "men of prowess," an institution associated with Hindu kingship even under Buddhist rule; but also manifesting in societies outside the Hindu mainstream (Wolters 1999, 113). In reconciling the secular and sacred sources of power, one could say that the sacred aspect of leadership did help in legitimating secular goals – control of trade – and shoring up obedience from rival centers.

Those who view Srivijaya as a single kingdom (even if only in the initial phase) tend to agree that it maintained its headquarters in Palembang on the Musi River in southeastern Sumatra. It is in this vicinity that most of the stone inscriptions were found, as well as other archaeological remains. Besides its reputation at the time as a place of power in Tantric ritual, reasons posited for selection of the lower Musi River for establishing the Srivijayan capital include the river's rich alluvial plain for the cultivation of surplus rice; its navigability, allowing access to forest products inland as well as the natural harbour some 80 kilometers downstream (Hall 2011, 113, 116; Junker 2006, 220). Such a distance would not have been considered an imposition but was the norm along the east Sumatran coast where the tidal swamplands affected the location of seaports. As Miksic (2011) notes, ports could be more than 100 kilometers from estuaries. Bearing this in mind, other port-settlements would have also proved serviceable for the role of capital. Notable among these is Jambi, north of Palembang, and located 120 kilometers up Sumatra's longest river, the Batanghari, representing a better location for accessing gold from the highlands of Minangkabau. Indeed, if there was life for Srivijaya after the 1025 Chola attack, then it was to be found at Jambi, conventionally regarded as Srivijaya's new capital and which could have been the Srivijayan royalty's point of origin rather than the more distant Funan in the Khmer region. What occasioned the shift to Jambi in 1079? Various theories have been put forward. These include Palembang's vulnerability to attack and Jambi's proximity to sources of gold in a more accessible hinterland (Lieberman 2009, 775). Silting of the Musi River to the point of blocking access to the sea is another reason posited for the decline of Palembang (Gipouloux 2011, 61). Considering its choice of ports along the Malacca Strait, with many being only about 10 kilometers up river (Miksic 2011), there was indeed a noticeable clinging to the Palembang-Jambi axis, around which a vast "empire" pivoted; moreover it served as the Malacca Strait's southern gate to the China trade. It was a gate which swung both ways, allowing China secure access to all that the Malacca region represented – trade with India and beyond, as well as a strategic outlet to compensate for periodic overland trade difficulties, as occurred during the Tang dynasty. Thus, China needed a reliable power to police the Strait.

At its peak in the ninth century Srivijaya exercised suzerainty over areas in Sumatra, western Java, possibly western Kalimantan, and certainly the Malay Peninsula right up to the Isthmus of Kra. Srivijayan rulers tried to curtail portage of seaborn trade across this narrow land-bridge in order to divert all trade to their own ports which, after all, were the primary source of their wealth. As a trans-shipment zone, the Malacca area was a "strategic place where ships were forced to congregate," according to a Chinese source of the time, the *Treatise on Foreign Lands* (Zhufanzhi, c. 1225 in Sumio 2006, 3). Indeed, there is a general consensus,

that at its height, Sriwijaya was "one of the major emporia of Asia, through which regional produce reached the markets of western Asia, India, and China" (Wolters 1999, 32).

Srivijaya – to continue in the vein of its singular identity – treated trade as an expression of its power as well as a secular source of it. This meant that it was better to monopolize than to compete and to trade through authorized government channels ("tribute-trade") rather than an open market. Though not always possible, it remained the preferred position, and a wider regional norm as demonstrated by China's own "tribute-trade" system. The result was centuries of (sometimes enforced) stability. This was because each dominant center (or a confederation), with the allegiance of secondary and tertiary centers, was the overlord of its domain. Thus Srivijaya's was the archipelago; China's tributaries included Srivijaya – and therefore its dependencies – within the Chinese sphere. Taylor (2003, 24) notes that:

> Chinese records show tribute missions (trade) in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries and again in the tenth and eleventh. Srivijaya's "tribute" consisted of pepper, resins, rattans, ivory, plumes, birds' nests, turtles, sea cucumber, and mother-of-pearl; "gifts" from China's emperors to Srivijaya were industrial dyes, iron, ceramics, and silk. In the Chinese presentation, for seven hundred years a Sumatran state is recognized as a vassal, which acts as intermediary for many barbarian archipelago harbor states, bringing their tribute to China along with Srivijaya's own. In Chinese presentation, the honor of being a vassal is conferred by China, and it is taken away by China when the vassal proves itself unworthy. In 1380, Srivijaya was stripped of its special relationship to China and the honor of being China's vassal was transferred to the Javanese kingdom of Majapahit.

Srivijaya was not only a vast maritime power, but can also be considered the first of its kind in island Southeast Asia. This is despite the existence of a central Javanese rival for control of the straits: the Sailendra dynasty (750–850), the details of which are as difficult to ascertain as those of Sriviyaya. Inscriptions and other evidence suggest the Sailendras asserted their influence on both island and mainland Southeast Asia for a time, but their kingdom was less a maritime power than a land-based one. The rich volcanic soils would yield a strong agricultural base whose wealth made possible the building of the famous Borobudur Buddhist monument in 778–824. However, when the Srivijayans and Sailendras became matrimonially related competition changed to a merger at the end of Sailendra's Javanese dynasty (SarDesai, 1994, 43-44; Zakharov, 2012). With or without the house of Sailendra, one could argue that there had never been a southern seas "empire" of Srivijaya's scale and organization before. Its dependencies were strung along the coastal and riverine ports of the archipelago, supplying the requisite trade items. By substituting local products of "comparable value" for Middle Eastern goods that were headed for the China market (Reynolds 1995, 433; Wolters 1974, ch. 9-10), such as Sumatran camphor for Arabian frankincense, Srivijaya distinguished itself as more than a mere middleman or one of the transit-stations along the maritime silk road. Together with the tolls charged on transiting ships, this commercial windfall could pay for a navy that was sufficiently powerful to prevent challenges to Srivijaya's monopoly. In return, the dependencies received a share of the wealth, piracy diminished (thanks to many of the pirates, or sea nomads, being recruited by the Srivijayan navy) and international traders found safe harbours, storage facilities for their goods, an emporium of products from

surrounding jungle and seas, and recreation while awaiting a change in the seasonal monsoonal winds for their return journey.

This single-state narrative could equally apply to a polycentric Srivijaya whose constituent parts sought recognition by the Chinese emperor as the southern seas representative for trade. Ironically, the structural source of Srivijaya'a wealth, the tribute-trade system that allowed for monopolistic practices, proved also to be its undoing. Rivals were bound to arise, as Srivijaya had not conquered all – either by force of arms or the spiritual charisma of its "men of prowess." Srivijaya's trade restrictions were challenged by other "kingdoms" which desired the benefits of its lucrative arrangements: Java invaded Sumatra at the end of the tenth century and would do so again; the Indian maritime kingdom of Chola – as noted above – sacked Palembang in 1025; mainland Southeast Asian kingdoms sought control of the isthmus trade in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and China itself became more active as a maritime power in the twelfth century sidelining Srivijaya (Lieberman 2009,775; Wolters 1999, 32). Srivijaya subsequently lost dominance over Sumatra to its possible erstwhile ancestor, the kingdom of Melayu centered on Jambi.

The decisive blow, it would appear, came from Java when in 1288 Srivijaya's power was absorbed by Singosari, and later in 1293 by its successor, the illustrious Majapahit which foreshadowed the unity of modern Indonesia with its motto of "unity in diversity." Even then, the vassal ruler of Palembang, Paramesvara, tried to gain investiture from China, but the Chinese envoys were prevented from reaching Sumatra. When the ruler of Majapahit, Hayam Waruk, died in 1389, Paramesvara made a last bid at rebellion in 1391–92 but was unsuccessful (Wolters 1970). Majapahit itself was finally conquered in the late 1400s by the Malacca Sultanate that claimed its lineage from Srivijaya. Malacca had become an Islamic polity through Paramesvara's marriage to a Muslim princess from northern Sumatra, and his self-appointed title of Sultan Iskandar Shah. Throughout all this, it is believed that he did not convert. Nonetheless, the conversion of Malacca was symptomatic of the phasing out of the maharajas of the "Indianized states" of Southeast Asia in favour of the sultans of a new arc of Islamic governance and commerce.

So far, the story told is of Srivijaya as a singular entity in competition with others, expanding and contracting, absorbing others and being absorbed. This phenomenon was given a name that helped locate it within its civilizational context. O. W. Wolters, followed by I. W. Mabbett and others referred to early Southeast Asian polities as "mandalas" (Wolters 1968 & 1982; Mabbett 1978; Stuart-Fox 2000; see also Dellios 2003), a Sanskrit political term that appeared to have been adopted by local rulers when they "self-Hinduized." Stone inscriptions have been found with the word mandala though, as shown below, its usage is not unequivocal. Besides being a specialist term employed by scholars to denote traditional South and Southeast Asian political formations, the term is commonly employed to describe a cosmogram used for spiritual contemplation, especially in Hinduism and Buddhism. Early political application may be found in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* or *The Science of Means*, a third century BCE Indian governance text, in which there are designated relationships of power in a "statal circle" (mandala) comprising a dozen polities (sometimes more, sometimes

less). With one of the 12 functioning as the orienting centre of strategic planning, it was a geostrategic balance-of-power system based on calculations like "my enemy's enemy is my friend." Kautilya's system of inter-mandala relations provides a number of options for action, including the pursuit of peace through treaty or alliances, a posture of neutrality, as well as war (Dellios 2003). So "mandala" can apply to spiritual, cultural, historical, and political formulations, or a combination of these – such as spiritual-political in accordance with the "man-of-prowess" concept. According to Reynolds (1995, 427): "From its root meaning of circle and its metaphoric meanings of totality and the perfection of Buddhahood, mandala has come to be a trope for the cluster of features that encode ancestor divinization, territory, and chiefly authority."

Wolters' use of the term mandala can refer to a single entity with an internal structure of concentric circles comprising a dominant overlord and tribute-paying "vassals," as well as to relations among a number of such entities in the region (Wolters 1968, 1982); in other words, the international system of the day. He did not speak of a polycentric mandala in its internal affairs. This may be explained by the Hindu and Buddhist system where there was only one "universal" sovereign (who was an ideal ruler, ethical and benevolent but also strong and capable of the providing security), despite the reality of many overlapping "universal" sovereigns within the region (Wolters 1999, 27). Wolters (1999, 27, note 1) even explains the Three Vijayas of Sanfoqi as possibly a Chinese attempt "to give effect to a Malay envoy's statement that his ruler claimed to be an overlord of three areas, each of which was known as a 'Vijaya'." Hence the Three Vijayas are interpreted here not as a confederation but one king above three. An absence of polycentricity within the "universal" sovereign's realm could also be related to the already versatile nature of the concentrically hierarchical mandala. A single polity's structure was not rigid but more of a "patchwork," according to Gesick (1983, 3), in which "the secondary and tertiary centers preserved a great deal of their internal autonomy in exchange for acknowledging the center's spiritual authority."

The mandala as a political term gives Srivijaya some credence as it is called by a name that is descriptive of its era. The problem here is that the stone inscriptions themselves did not use the term mandala, with the exception of the seventh century Telaga Batu-2 inscription. Its use of mandala was for smaller territorial units controlled by vassal chiefs within the larger unit of Srivijaya (De Casparis 1956, 35; Zakharov 2009, 3). There is also the argument that refutes the use of special terms like mandala to designate the political constructs of a particular time and place, as these only serve to essentialize and orientalize the object of study. Still, as Reynolds (1995, 427-9) points out, when mandala-as-state is employed as a "a hermeneutic aid, not a thing whose existence has to be proved beyond the shadow of a doubt" or a model "used more or less scientifically to describe early Southeast Asian societies," then the use of special terminology makes sense.

Besides its hermeneutic assistance, a second advantage of the scholastic employment of the term mandala is that it provides a greater depth of understanding when issues of "strategic culture" – that is, a people's distinctive style of dealing with and thinking about the problems of national security – arise. Strategic culture complements the study of geopolitics by

imbuing the physical world with cultural and historical interpretation. A mandalic strategic culture implies flexibility in terms of changing allegiances. But this also entails instability. The system, in Stuart-Fox's words (1996, 4), "was open to any ruler to test his own merit against that of other rulers." Merit meant spiritual and charismatic power, and equates with Wolters' "man of prowess" concept. It was derived from the prevailing Hindu-Buddhist religious culture. Srivijaya managed, for the most part, to balance flexibility against instability. Or, in the language of today's systems theory, Srivijaya exhibited "resilience" in an inherently unstable system (see Dellios 2010).

A third benefit in using the mandala concept is that it permits a region-wide analysis rather than one that is based on Western concepts of state, or the colonial legacy. Subsequent independence and nation-building exercises often utilize history as a cohesive element. This works well when there is a significant Other, the colonizer from whom political power is wrested. But it hardly helps the historian who desires a more global view. Legge (1999, 4-5) notes that before World War II there was "the almost universal tendency of historians to focus on the constituent parts of Southeast Asia rather than to develop a perception of the region as a whole as a suitable object of study." For this broader vantage-point (see also Acharya 2000), the Srivijayan experience suggests a mandalic region of interacting power centers in which dominance is maintained through an astute handling of relations and the exercise of both hard and soft power. In this Srivijaya – whether mandala-as-state or state-as-polycentric mandala – had performed particularly well, not only by its own efforts but also through ensuring Chinese recognition of its legitimacy.

3. *Thinking Through* the Mandala-Tianxia interface

China obliged from within the inner workings of its own mandala. It saw itself as the political and spiritual center of all-under-Heaven (*tianxia*). This entailed tribute-trade relations with "vassal states" along China's peripheral regions, even if these "vassals" viewed the relationship in more pragmatic terms of trade, regional stability and political kudos that served a domestic constituency. Thus imperial China's geo-cosmological world order was one in which its identity as Zhongguo, meaning the Middle Kingdom – a name which it retains to this day – was predicated on two kinds of centrality: (1) a politico-territorial one of tribute to the emperor; and (2) a moral-cosmological order of ensuring harmony. To this end, the Chinese emperor performed rites to ensure China was in a state of equilibrium between potentiality and actuality, between the "yang"-power of Heaven and the "yin"-nourishment of Earth, following the yin-yang polarity of complementary opposites in Chinese philosophy. This was intended to bestow harmony to all-under-Heaven – the Chinese world order. It was an "international relations" system that was to endure until the fading years of the Chinese empire in the late nineteenth century when European imperialism dictated its own international rules (see Hamashita 2003). Until then, however, there were tributary relations intersecting throughout Eastern Asia, without detracting from China's ceremonial role of the tributary and symbolic center.

While contributing to what may be termed a "mandalic regionalism," China itself was an empire. This is worth elaborating as it provides a different view of empire to that of Srivijaya even though both displayed mandalic properties within their tribute-trade systems and China, similar to the polycentric theory of Srivijaya, was once a "confederacy" operating under a declining Zhou leadership (devolving into a multi-state system during the Warring States period). In other words, there were a number of Middle Kingdoms during the Spring and Autumn Period of 722–481 BCE before China was unified in 221 BCE. This meant it was brought under a centralized government, with a supporting bureaucracy, and a permanent army to defend the empire. Yet Chinese identity does not begin with political unification but goes back to a founding myth. The *Records of the Grand Historian* (109–91 BCE) of Sima Qian begins Chinese history with the mythical Yellow Emperor at around 2600 BCE. There were three progenitor dynasties – those of the Xia, Shang and Zhou – that were based on tribes, then feudal states, that owed allegiance to a central king. When these allegiances wore thin, and the house of Zhou was left with only ceremonial and religious significance, the system began to disintegrate. There followed a protracted era of instability that culminated in the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE). One "state," the Qin, was victorious over all others. Its ruler, in a bid for spiritual and not only martial legitimacy, claimed to be descended from the progenitor dynasties and hence a new phase in Chinese history began. Thereafter, the dynastic rulers would be emperors, whereas previously they were kings; though in making this simple distinction Keay (2009, 15), in his history of dynastic China, notes: "No royal dynasties and few imperial dynasties exercised uncontested sway." China was not the homogenous whole in contrast to Srivijaya's malleable mandala. Its dynastic constancy and imperial uniformity were the ideals esteemed by official historians, to the point where some dynasties were considered legitimate and others not. This reflects on China's robust and politically-charged historical drama. China's constancy was more a case of its cycle of upheaval and renewal, division and reunification. Even while Srivijaya endured its challenges and adaptations (whether as a shift in capitals from Palembang to Jambi or through regional alliance politics), China's Tang gave way to civil war and a rapid succession of dynasties before the emergence of the Song – which itself was divided into southern and northern dynasties.

Despite domestic upheaval China maintained contact with Southeast Asia, and not only for state-endorsed reasons. There was another attraction: the pilgrimage trail. For both China and Southeast Asia, Buddhism from India had taken root. Srivijaya had become a center of Buddhist studies and worship, much used by Chinese pilgrim-scholars on their way to India. The most well-known is the aforementioned Yijing. While travelling to Nalanda in India as a Buddhist pilgrim, he stayed in Srivijaya (Palembang and later Jambi) in 671-72 and again in the 680s to 695. His records are a key surviving source of our knowledge of Srivijaya. Yijing's writings – he wrote three books, his *Record*, *Memoir* and a translation of a Buddhist Sanskrit text – represent an alternative source of knowledge on Srivijaya compared to the records of tribute missions to the emperor of China. Nonetheless, travellers' records were incorporated in Chinese intelligence-gathering on foreign lands. Srivijaya was a welcoming destination for pilgrims as well as for merchants:

Srivijaya's rulers indulged in support of international scholars devoted to exploring Buddhist doctrines. Srivijaya's reputation as a center for the study of Buddhism enticed Chinese scholars bound for India to make the long detour south. In Srivijaya they furthered their knowledge of Sanskrit grammar and of doctrine in preparation for more advanced studies at Buddhist centers in India itself. Within Chinese imperial records there is a direct reference to Srivijaya as site of a community of one thousand students of Buddhism (Taylor 2003, 25).

Yijing had spent four years in Palembang translating Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit to Chinese and had an opportunity to observe Srivijayans on "home ground." Scholar-pilgrims like him from China opened an intellectual dialogue with Southeast Asian colleagues. Their common quest was for greater and more accurate knowledge of Buddhism and its texts. The temper of the times recognised the legitimacy of the pursuit of spiritual treasures alongside material ones, with the two intertwining when it came to the prestige sought by rulers in both China and Srivijaya. Besides a certain zeitgeist for intellectual development, there was also a long standing strategic culture that imbued the leader with "spiritual prowess" across temporal and religious boundaries. In Srivijaya's case it was the "man of prowess" who also derived merit from the advancement of Buddhist learning. From the Hindu perspective, he had an educative role through his identification with the authority of Siva who was "the *guru* of the universe" (Wolters 1999, 31). For China, the emperor in his position as Son of Heaven would possessed, from a Daoist perspective, a "penetrating insight" into affairs of the world (Wechsler 1985, 86); and from a Confucian one was guided by the wisdom of the ancients which the philosopher Confucius (551 BCE–479 BCE) assiduously taught. So while there were differences in organization between the two political systems, one being an Indic mandala and the other an imperial system of *tianxia* governance, values were similar in the upholding the tribute-trade system of secular power which, in turn, was bolstered by the moral-cosmological order embodied in the monarch.

4. *Thinking Through* Srivijaya's Indic spirituality and Malay worldliness

At this point it is not surprising to encounter yet another point of possible confusion, that of Srivijaya's religious identity which leads to its most elaborate myth – or reality – its Malay "ethnicity." The first fallacy to dismiss is the belief that Hinduism arrived in Southeast Asia before Buddhism, and therefore acts as a referent for "Malay" identity. Recent radiocarbon dating of Buddhist archaeological remains indicates that they are as early Hindu ones (Miksic 2010, 1, citing Ferdinandus 2002). A second fallacy derives from "projecting modern concepts of religious affiliation back ten centuries and more" (Milner 2008, 77). Both Hindu and Buddhist images, concepts and practices were used in "Indianized" Southeast Asia, though whether this was done syncretically or in parallel development, remains open to debate. However, as Miksic (2010, 2-3) notes, they did "share a common conception of the objective of life and of religious behaviour: to achieve a comprehension of 'Absolute Reality', usually considered to centre on the relationship between humans and the divine. Understanding the true nature of this relationship was usually believed to confer supernatural powers." Not surprisingly, the esoteric aspects of both were cultivated through tantric sects. Tantra is both Hindu and Buddhist, and refers to texts as well as practices. In Hinduism it is often associated with Siva and his Sakti (divine energy). In Buddhism it features Vajrayana

(the reality of emptiness) and associated meditative practices.[2] This mystical element is apparent in Srivijayan inscriptions which, in turn, served to advertise the power and virtue of the ruler; while in the intellectual sphere, Buddhist scholarship was so advanced in Srivijaya that it attracted many scholars from the time of Yijing through to Atisha who assisted in the development of Vajrayana Buddhism in eleventh century Tibet.

On the politico-esoteric side, the founder of the new dynasty of Sriviyaja is said to have engaged in siddhiyatra, defined as "a voyage or a pilgrimage from which one returns endowed with magical powers" (Andaya 2008, 55) or in Edwards' (1985, 9) phrase "mystical prowess." This is stated in the Kedukan Bukit Inscription which begins with the salutation: "Om swasti astu," meaning "All hail and prosperity." Then it speaks of a royal journey: "In the year 605 of the [Indian] Saka calendar [683 CE], on the eleventh day at half-moon of Waisaka [Buddha's anniversary], His Majesty took a boat obtain siddhayatra." This was performed in the company of "20,000 troops and 312 people in boats and 1312 foot soldiers" which suggests a more material mission, that of conquest. Yet this quest for spiritual power as the prelude to conquest appears to be an accustomed sequence of events in the region. An example is Srivijaya's nemesis, Singosari in East Java. Its king, Kertanagara, was a tantric practitioner of the Siva-Buddha cult who underwent a consecration ceremony to make him a Buddha-Bhairava (Hall 1981, 84). Kertanagara's goal was the spiritual unification of his kingdom/mandala which was threatened by invasion from the forces of Khubilai Khan, grandson of one of history's "world-conquerors," Chinggis (Ghengis) Khan. Khubilai Khan had also undergone two dedication ceremonies as a Jina-Buddha, one in 1264 and another in 1269 (Hall 1981, 86), while Reischauer and Fairbank (1970, 278) note that he was declared by the Buddhist clergy a cakravartin, the "universal" sovereign under the Buddhist ideal. It was only two years after the second consecration that he commenced the Yuan dynasty of China. Clearly there was a vast Buddhist world spanning many parts of Asia and Srivijaya gained international prestige as a leading Buddhist country (see Hall 2011, 117).

But was Srivijaya's sphere within the Buddhist world also a defining age in the development of what has been termed the Malay world? It denotes Malay-speaking (mainly maritime) Southeast Asia with its cultural heartland in the Melayu-Jambi area of Sumatra. This could in fact have been the most important of Srivijaya's centers, and it is the site of the massive Muarajambi temple complex, located near modern Jambi on the Batanghari River. Only a tenth of the total complex, spanning 2062 hectares, has been restored (McGhee 2013, 376). This potential World Heritage site will be bigger than Borobudur – if industrial development nearby does not impede its full restoration. If the Malay world is a mandala, it too would be polycentric as it is scattered throughout the archipelago, and it would be more classically Buddhist than its later identification with the "Southeast Asian age of commerce," to borrow Reid's (1990) book title, between the fifteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries. This was the Islamic period of sultanates that came after Srivijaya's time. Recent research by Tee Boon Chuan (2014) even suggests that Malay literary and intellectual history should be viewed as having undergone its "classical period" in Srivijaya in the seventh to eleventh centuries, rather than the conventionally accepted sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. He sees an evolution in Malay literary thought from the "classical Buddhistic Yogacara school in

Srivijaya to the post-classical Islamic Sufi school in Aceh" and also a greater acknowledgement of the Hindu texts, explaining that the canonical texts of the period should derive not only from Buddhism, but also include Hinduism's "five Weda or 'pancaweda' in the language of the oldest known Malay manuscript Kitab Undang-Undang Tanjung Tanah written around 1304CE-1436CE by Kuja Ali."

For all the esoteric aspects of an evolving Malay world, from the Indic to the Sufic, there was also a certain Malay "worldliness." This can be seen in not only in the "use" of the sacred to assist in accruing power in secular affairs – be they military or commercial – but also in other ways: a resilience that comes from mandalic calculations. As Wolters (1999, 28-29) enumerates, these include: (1) intelligence gathering so that the ruler is aware of activities at the mandala fringes to anticipate threats and also to grasp geopolitical developments in the wider trading region; and (2) the use of astute diplomacy and personal relationship as "a successful *mandala* overlord . . . had to be able to dispossess his rivals of their claims to space in their own right, bring them under his personal influence, and accommodate them within a network of loyalties to himself, even though they often lived in distant areas." This meant he administered through the management of personal relationships and psychological understanding, using inducements of his office, such as investiture as well as economic rewards that accrued from his rule. The same principles applied to small and large mandalas, so that the distinction between internal and external affairs was clouded: "In practice all relations tended to be perceived as personal and therefore internal ones" (Wolters 1999, 29).

Was Srivijaya a regional polycentric mandala?

From this vantagepoint of *thinking through* Srivijaya using the mandala political philosophy as medium, we return to the question of achieving greater understanding of the principal issues in Srivijaya's existence. In doing so, it would help to return to the example of Rome at the start of this paper with its many converging roads: the monument at the centre of ancient Rome, the Miliarium Aureum (Golden Milestone), marked the center of empire. Hence we have the idiom in the English language that denotes paths leading to a center. It also means many paths lead to the same goal. This is suggestive of mandalic thinking. It is the idea of a central goal, god or virtue, surrounded by various means and guarded gateways (which must be navigated) but which ultimately lead to the core value located at the center of a spatial representation, or cosmogram. Political mandalas would have the king at the center identify himself with either a Hindu god or a Buddhist enlightened being known as a bodhisattva. Mandalas can be polycentric when various "centers" form mutually constitutive relationships in spatial proximity. In Buddhism this concept parallels the theory of Codependent Origination (Skt: *Pratityasamutpada;* Tib: *ten del*). As a general theory of causation and interdependence, it "delineates the processes by which all phenomena come into existence; not from or for their own sake but as a result of other equally contingent phenomena" (Grey 2007, 1). While power shifted from one tributary to another and circled around again, it was still the case that the idea of a unified "empire" prevailed, as demonstrated by the Majapahit mandala with its territorial expanse from southern Thailand across the archipelago down to New Guinea. The fluctuation of loyalties and the indeed the emergence of serious challengers

to the dominant ruler meant that borders were fluid, expanding, contracting and shifting the centre of political gravity. Pre-colonial Southeast Asia, irrespective of whether the royal court was Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic, displayed this common characteristic of being organized through royal centers forming a polycentric region. Polycentricity did not subside when the empire was "unified" but realigned to the dominant center – or centres in the probable case of Srivijaya when it became known to the Chinese as Sanfoqi. Instead, there was a networked system of political relationships superimposed over a geopolitical map in which the Malacca Strait represented the center of two of the three "trading circles" that spanned the wider region of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Drawing on documentation of maritime routes during Srivijaya's heyday, Qin and Xiang (2011, 19) have shown these three circles to be "between China and Southeast Asia (mainly Sumatra and Java), between Southeast Asia and Arabia and the Persian Gulf, and between the Arabian area and east Africa . . . Sri Vijaya and Basra were the two key points of trading interchange that connected the three circles."

The rise and fall of great polities of the past came in different forms. For Southeast Asia, the analogy is often one of dynamic "circles" of power that expand and contract. These circles had a center or seed, be it a settlement or a royal palace, out of which grew the loose Indic-influenced kingdoms, sometimes termed "mandalas." In this formative stage they carried pre-Indic indigenous names. As Reynolds explains: "These terms refer to the core areas which gave rise to principalities, kingdoms, and empires" (Reynolds 1995, 424; see also Kulke 1991). These larger formations became known by the Sanskrit term, mandala. But in terms of a regional consciousness, of being part of a whole, the mandalic region's adaptability meant that could "make sense of just about anything that was originally 'foreign'" (Reynolds 1995, 427). The same could be said of China. Having borrowed Buddhism from India, China became a Buddhist country in addition to a Daoist and Confucian one, eventually accommodating all three, though during the Tang dynasty it was pre-eminently a Buddhist one.

Whereas Buddhism linked China with Srivjaya spiritually and intellectually, Islam was commonly the faith of China's maritime communities involved in overseas trade. The historical records show that Srivijaya may well have used Arab merchants as tribute envoys to China (Chaffee 2006, 408). Islam, like Buddhism, has remained part of multi-ethic China, often in areas of contested politics and identity: namely, Buddhist Tibet and Muslim Xinjiang. By comparison, the entry of Islam in Sumatra meant that the Buddhist world of Srivijaya was unravelling. Still, Southeast Asia's strategic geography, especially the transit areas, was such that the very designation of the region between India and China as a distinct entity – "Southeast Asia" – occurred when it was declared a theater of operations during the Second World War. To this day the regional designation remains.

Reflections on Contemporary Relations

Within the first "trading circle" or maritime trading mandala, spanning China and Southeast Asia, both modern China and Indonesia remain circumscribed by their geography but also enticed by the developmental potential it offers each nation. As China rises again to a

position of pre-eminence, albeit within a changed international system based on Westphalian sovereignty rather than Chinese suzerainty, it is still the case that its fortunes depend on the maritime geography along the southern seas, especially the Malacca Strait. The term "Malacca dilemma," as noted from the outset, captures its importance to China's survival, so much so that China – short of an expensive and diplomatically disastrous arms race – realizes the solution to the "Malacca dilemma" must rest with cooperative regionalism. This depends on trust and norm building through the various multilateral organizations that have taken over from the Buddhist networks of the Srivijayan period. Notable among these is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which China became a dialogue partner in 1996. ASEAN and its extensions – the "ASEAN Plus" system (such as ASEAN Plus China, Japan and South Korea), ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, and the newer East Asia Summit (EAS) – are where the big powers operate. China has not superimposed itself over ASEAN in any new economic "tribute system" but engages in a flexible and informal style, as regional cooperation has tended to start with informal dialogue and then progress to practical projects, for example, the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement or new rail networks interlinking southern China with mainland Southeast Asia. At the same time, it should be noted, Buddhism has not lost its relevance for the PRC. It remains geopolitically embedded within China in the form of Tibetan Buddhism which challenges the dominant Han narrative of Chinese identity, but in doing so also reminds China of its historical multiculturalism. Likewise, revivals of Mahayana Buddhism within modern China have given it a focus for new patterns of informal diplomacy towards parts of Southeast and South Asia. This should be an asset for any nation that seeks to play a constructive role in a globalized world.

At the other end of the "trading circle" is Indonesia which having cultivated its regional ties through ASEAN is about to do the same with the other two "trading circles", those between Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral of the Gulf region and east Africa. In this respect it is well placed as Jakarta will be the chair of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) for two years from 2015 (see Santikajaya 2014). Like Srivijaya, Indonesia needs to consider how to maximize the economic and strategic benefits of its geography. Otherwise problems of size and distances can be debilitating:

> The combination of 17,000 islands with an underfunded navy and poor port infrastructure results in widespread piracy, illegal fishing, and smuggling. The extraordinarily high costs of transporting goods domestically makes it cheaper for Indonesians to consume foreign goods than domestic ones, and makes the nation function more as a collection of weakly integrated economies than as a unified market (Neary 2014).

The new Indonesian president, Joko Widodo, has clearly given the matter some thought and has expressed his view that Indonesia's role should be that of a "global maritime nexus." He has talked about this doing his visits to various summits – the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN, EAS and G20. Speaking at the East Asia Summit in Naypyidaw, Myanmar, in November 2014, he outlined a five-pronged approach to achieve this goal (Neary 2014):

1.   A revival of Indonesia's maritime culture, recognizing the link between the country's archipelagic geography, identity, and livelihood;

2.   Improved management of Indonesia's oceans and fisheries through the development of the country's fishing industry and building maritime "food sovereignty" and security;

3.   Boosting Indonesia's maritime economy by improving the country's port infrastructure, shipping industry, and maritime tourism;

4.   Maritime diplomacy that encourages Indonesia's partners to work together to eliminate conflict arising over illegal fishing, breaches of sovereignty, territorial disputes, piracy, and environmental concerns like marine pollution; and

5.   Bolstering Indonesia's maritime defenses, both to support the country's maritime sovereignty and wealth, and to fulfill its role in maintaining safety of navigation and maritime security.

If this were to be realized, then there would be more than economic and security benefits: The commitment to Indonesia becoming a "global maritime nexus" is suggestive of the "Sriwijaya idea," as Singapore's Nalanda-Sriwijaya Center (NSC) expresses it. It is the idea of "Southeast Asia as a place of mediation and linkages among the great civilisations." There were polycentric networks in terms of trade, political prestige and religious culture in traditional Southeast Asia. This maritime regionalism grew into the "idea of an Asian maritime super-region" (Medcalf, 2013) in the early fifteenth century voyages of Ming admiral Zheng He. Indeed, the mighty Ming, which was to follow through over a century after the Sino-Srivijayan period, with its diplomatic "treasure fleet" – the most technologically advanced in the world – relied on Malacca as a staging point for travels into the Indian Ocean. The regional map had already been traversed, and populated with the Chinese diaspora, who were often termed Tang-ren (the people of Tang). The Ming's "maritime super-region" was an amplified rekindling of a Tang-Song memory; while in Srivijaya's case, its mandalic regional project was taken over by Majapahit from its Java base, incorporating the wealth of land power with that of the sea. Such open regionalism built on common interests between China and island Southeast Asia sets an historical standard for today's aspirations. In this regard, territorial disputes in the South China Sea and a looming sense of China as threat rather than opportunity need to be moderated by a deeper probe into historical relations, with a special regard for the role of Srivijaya.

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