

Reading Song-Ming Records on the Pre-colonial History of the Philippines¹⁾

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Chinese records of the Song-Ming period provide the context necessary for our understanding of the history of the pre-colonial Philippines. Rulers of chiefdoms in the region employed unique methods and formed far-reaching networks when trading with each other and with China. Trade was one of their ways to build domestic power structure and to establish their positions relative to one another in regional politics. They also organized missions to seek Chinese recognition of these power relations.

Key words: Trade, chiefdom, regional politics, Chinese-Philippine relations, history of the Philippines

Chinese records contain a wealth of information on pre-colonial Southeast Asia. Although fragmentary, these records are valuable since no other written records existed prior to the arrival of the Europeans in the region. Many of these records were based on indirect knowledge of the region. Their compilers often gathered relevant information from merchants trading to Southeast Asia or to China, envoys coming from the region, or Chinese officials working at the Bureau of Maritime Trade. A few Yuan and Ming dynasty works, such as the *Brief accounts of barbarian islanders* (*Daoyi zhiliu* 島夷誌略), the *Wondrous observations from the star raft* (*Xingcha shenglan* 星槎勝覽) and the *Wondrous observations of the ocean's shores* (*Yingya shenglan* 瀛涯勝覽), were rare eyewitness accounts. The authors either personally participated in voyages to Southeast Asia, or joined the famous Ming-dynasty eunuch Zheng He 鄭和, whose fleet stopped at various ports in Southeast Asia en rout from China to Africa. Modern scholars have availed themselves of these records in research.²⁾ Some have also pointed out that Chinese records have obfuscated the historical reality of countries in the region, since their compilers observed these countries from a Chinese worldview. And the terminologies they used to describe the events in the region were also laden with their own political ideology.³⁾ This author argues that the problem in using Chinese records to

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2) See, for example, Oliver W. Wolters, *The fall of Śrīvijaya in Malay history* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970). He used Chinese records extensively in this study of trade in Śrīvijaya in the fourteenth century.

3) For issues related with Chinese records on Southeast Asia, see Oliver W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Revised edition) (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1999), p. 109. See also his “Restudying some Chinese writings on Śrīvijaya,” *Indonesia*, 42 (1986), pp. 1–41. Claude Jacques, “‘Funnan’, Zhenla, the reality concealed by these Chinese views of Indochina,” in *Early Southeast Asia: Essays in archaeology, history, and historical*

and support from China were useful to Southeast Asian rulers in both domestic politics and regional power relationship. They could “brag about” Chinese support that they enjoyed to their competitors so as to shore up their claim for positions that they perceived appropriate in the immerging power relations in the region.

The Chinese records that we have so far examined show that chiefdoms in the pre-colonial Philippines did not exist in economic isolation. They employed unique methods and formed far-reaching networks when trading with each other and with China. Rulers of these chiefdoms were sophisticated players in power relationship. They organized missions to seek Chinese recognition of their domestic power structure and of their positions relative to each other in regional politics. And these missions reveal the existence of paramount chiefdoms in the Philippines. Chinese records not only provide the historical context necessary for our understanding of recent archaeological findings in the Philippines. They also necessitate reconsideration and revision of some of the concepts and the assumptions that western scholars have widely used in their study of maritime Southeast Asia.⁶³⁾

63) These assumptions would include: “men of prowess,” “cognate kinship,” and the process of “self-Hinduization” in Southeast Asia. “Big man” as a form of political leadership, and “political entities that existed in isolation with each other” also need to be reexamined. For a critical survey of modern scholarship on ancient Southeast Asia, see Craig J. Reynolds, “A new look at Old Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 54:2 (1995), pp. 419–46.