

From 'piracy' to inter-regional trade: the Sunda Straits zone, c. 1750-1800

Theme >
Trade patterns

Incessant 'piracy' in the Sunda Straits Zone in the second half of the eighteenth century was tied to the expanding Canton trade. Bugis, Iranun, Malay, Chinese and English traders were directly or indirectly involved in the plunder of pepper, a profitable commodity to exchange for tea in Canton. Their activities accelerated the demise of the already malfunctioning Dutch East India Company trading system and the emergence of a new order in Southeast Asian trade.

Ota Atsushi

The declining Dutch trading system

Since their arrival in Java towards the end of the sixteenth century, the Dutch attempted to establish an exclusive trading system in the Indonesian Archipelago. They concluded treaties with local rulers, often in return for military assistance, stipulating that the Dutch East India Company (VOC) would retain the right of monopoly on important export products and prohibiting all but authorized Dutch, indigenous, and Chinese merchants from their trade. Although the system was not always effective, it contributed to the VOC's collection of Southeast Asian products for the European market.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the emergence of the Canton trade began to seriously affect the Dutch trading system. As tea was becoming more and more profitable in Europe, Europeans - the English East India Company (EIC), English country traders, and the VOC, among others - enthusiastically promoted their trade in Canton, the only port in Qing China open to foreign traders.

To facilitate their trade in tea, European traders needed Southeast Asian products, which were in great demand in China. Tin, pepper and edible maritime products were, in this order, the most valuable commodities in terms of trade value; the EIC, English country and Chinese traders sought after these products in independent ports outside the Dutch trading system. In response, Riau, the capital of the kingdom of Johor, emerged as a new trade centre. Southeast Asian products were transported by local and Bugis traders to Riau in exchange for Chinese and Indian commodities, and carried by Chinese and English country traders to Canton. In contrast to the ineffective VOC monopoly system, Riau prospered by attracting traders from various regions in Asia.

the growing Canton trade and its demand for Southeast Asian products transformed the maritime trade in the Archipelago.... Demand for products 'banned' by the VOC fuelled 'piracy' and 'smuggling'

Pepper was one of the most important trade items in Riau. According to Dutch and English reports, some 5,000 to 10,000 pikul (one pikul = 61.75 kg) of pepper were traded in Riau in the 1780s. This meant that English country traders collected the greater part of their pepper in Riau. Nevertheless, important pepper-growing regions, such as Lampung, Palembang, Jambi, and Banjarmasin had already been incorporated into the

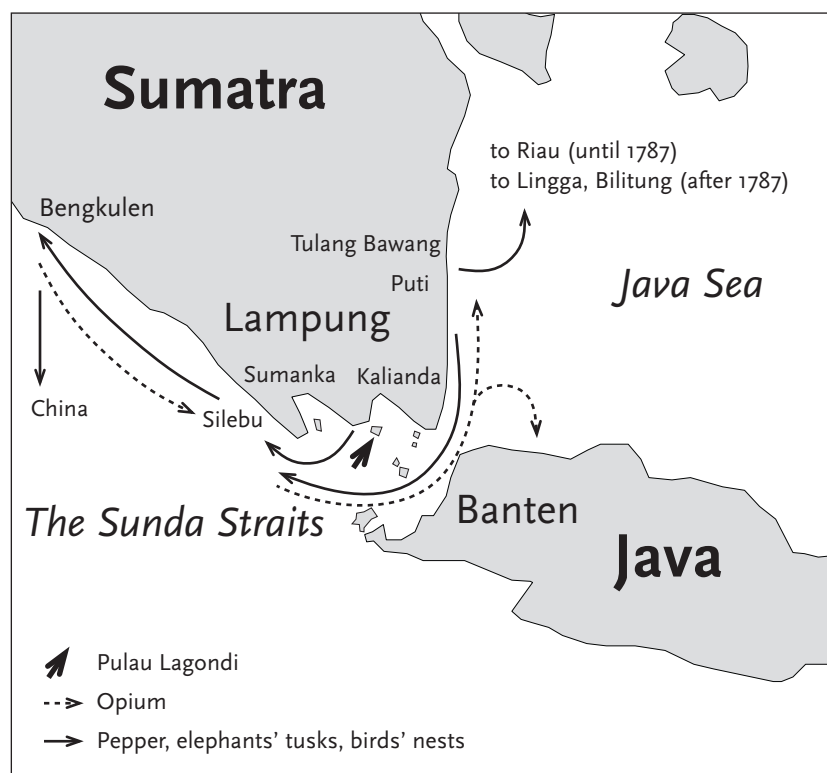
Dutch trading system. This is why a certain proportion of the pepper had to be collected by way of 'piracy' and 'smuggling'.²

Raiding

The Chinese demand for pepper made Lampung one of the most important raiding targets from the 1750s. Lampung was the largest pepper-producing region in Southeast Asia in the eighteenth century, providing about forty to eighty per cent of the pepper the VOC annually collected in Batavia. Nevertheless the region was vulnerable as neither its sovereign, the sultan of Banten, nor his overlord, the VOC, could effectively control the region due to their chronic financial and administrative problems.

tions to Lampung. Stimulated by these groups, Chinese, Bugis, Malay, and Palembang raiders also intensified their activities.

Raiders' plundering seriously impacted on the pepper trade in the Archipelago. According to a report sent by F. H. Beijnon, Commander of the VOC Banten factory to the Governor-General in Batavia on 30 September 1792, in the period from January 1791 to September 1792 - the only one for which information on the scale of raiding is available - 6,000 pikul of pepper, 4,190 Spanish Reals and 35 men lost to raiders, the result of attacks on 18 villages and 23 vessels in the Lampung and Sunda Straits regions. 6,000 pikul of pepper



Inter-regional trade in the Sunda Straits Zone in the second half of the eighteenth century

Raiding intensified from the late 1780s; two factors were behind this. First, Lingga emerged as a major base for raiding. The 1784 VOC attack on Riau and its subsequent occupation abruptly ended Riau's prosperity. Although Sultan Mahmud of Johor successfully

in twenty-one months, or some 3,400 pikul per year, equalled thirty-five to seventy per cent of the amount previously traded in Riau. It also amounted to about twenty per cent of all the pepper the VOC gained from Lampung. Thus raiding became an important channel for collecting pepper - and to a considerable extent, at the expense of VOC trade.

Although the Dutch report above mentions a relatively small number, manpower was also an important plundering target for raiders. Raiders conducted kidnappings every year, and in the largest such case, 130 people were captured in one attack. Some of the captured were sent to a market in Bilitung, probably to be resold to other regions, while others were brought to the pepper-growing region in Lampung, probably as enslaved labourers. In order to maintain their activities, raiders also plundered food, cargo ships and other necessities during their attacks on villages.

Although the Dutch continuously attempted to prevent raiding, their efforts proved ineffective. Dutch ships could not catch up with those of the raiders, as the latter could move faster with their sailing and rowing techniques. It was also difficult to find the raiders hidden in small inlets and on the many islands in the area.

A new pattern in inter-regional trade

The risky business of raiding would not have been possible without a network that exchanged the booty for money or

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other necessary and profitable commodities. From the 1760s the increase in raiding around the Sunda Straits coincided with the development of an organized trade pattern, in which raiders' booty was exchanged for money and foreign commodities. The English were the most important buyers; a group of English traders staying in Silebu, a raiders' meeting point, bartered ammunition for pepper from the raiders. They even arranged a ship for the raiders to rob pepper from cargo ships passing near Pulau Lagondi.

Apart from direct contact around Silebu, Chinese traders based on Silebu and Pulau Lagondi usually mediated between the raiders and the English. The Chinese traders maintained regular contact with the English in Bengkulen, and exchanged their pepper for opium. Chinese intermediaries further promoted inter-regional trade: in defiance of the Dutch monopoly, they collected pepper, elephants' tusks and birds' nests along the Lampung coast, in exchange for English opium and textiles. They also brought a part of the English opium to the eastern part of Banten, where the sugar industry - mostly in the hands of Chinese sugar entrepreneurs - had developed since the early eighteenth century. In spite of their obligation to purchase opium from the VOC, sugar mill owners looked for cheaper opium from Bengkulen brought by Chinese traders.

This trade pattern benefited not only foreign traders, but local elites. Raden Intan in Kalianda, for example, sold pepper to the English, thereby demonstrating his disloyalty to the sultan of Banten and the Dutch. The English bought pepper at higher prices than the sultan of Banten had set, and brought textiles and opium for local people.

Thus the English presence in Silebu and Bengkulen led to their obtaining a large part of the plundered and secretly traded Lampung pepper. Their trading methods using various groups of raiders and traders, and their access to opium, which they brought from Bengal, gave the English an upper hand in competition with the Dutch. As a result, the EIC

and English country traders were able to bring large amounts of pepper to Canton: fifty to ninety per cent of all the pepper transported by European traders.

The growing Canton trade and its demand for Southeast Asian products transformed the maritime trade in the Archipelago in the second half of the eighteenth century. Demand for products 'banned' by the VOC fuelled 'piracy' and 'smuggling' in many places, among them the Sunda Straits Zone. From the raider's booty the English obtained, among others, pepper, in

exchange for opium and ammunition. This exchange formed a new trade pattern in the Sunda Straits Zone, and subsequently undermined the old Dutch trading system.

Although raiding and inter-regional trade existed in this area since older times, the trade pattern in this period was distinguished by two new factors: the role of the English in inter-regional trade and the role of Bengali opium. Since opium was further distributed in the area by the Chinese, the English and the Chinese emerged as partners. These factors became precursors to the Southeast Asian trade that the British presided over after the establishment of Singapore in 1819. Raiding and the new trade patterns in the Sunda Straits Zone in the late eighteenth century were an embryo of the new order in nineteenth-century Southeast Asia. <

Notes

1. My discussion is based on Dutch and English primary sources from the National Archives in The Hague and Jakarta, and in the British Library. Source references will be given in my forthcoming PhD dissertation.
2. Although Chinese-owned plantations in Trengganu and Brunei produced considerable amounts of pepper, it was directly brought to China by Chinese traders. Aceh's extraordinary increase of pepper production occurred only after 1800.

Ota Atsushi is a research fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, and a PhD candidate at CNWS, Leiden University. His previous publications include "'Traditional' versus 'Modern' Administrative Concepts: Dutch Intervention and Its Results in Rural Banten, 1760-1790." Itinerario 27-2, and 'Banten Rebellion, 1750-1752: Factors behind the Mass Participation'. Modern Asian Studies 37-3 (2003).
a.ota@let.leidenuniv.nl