

*In Asian Waters: Oceanic Worlds from Yemen to Yokohama*

ERIC TAGLIACCOZZO

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.

*In Asian Waters* is Eric Tagliacozzo's third volume of a trilogy that begins with the illicit trade in Southeast Asia, then "expands" to a second volume on Southeast Asians making the pilgrimage to Mecca. In this remarkable sweep of the last five hundred years (and an occasional sortie into the older years), Tagliacozzo asks us to stretch our imagination further and look back at a realm far more extensive and perhaps even richer than Fernand Braudel's Mediterranean zone. With considerable deference, he builds on the writings of historians specializing in specific regions. He also brings in the twenty-year research that took him all over these worlds to produce a far larger narrative of ocean-wide maritime routes that connected places like Hormuz and Aden to Madagascar and Bombay, Hoi-an, Singapore, Zamboanga, Shanghai, Okinawa, and Nagasaki (there is even a mention of northern Australia) as far back as two thousand years ago.

But this breadth is not the book's only appeal. *In Asian Waters* is also a methodological delight. By citing Dutch (instead of French) sources, Tagliacozzo shows how, far from being an insignificant player in global trade, Vietnam was one of the centers of exchange. Ideational flows, especially of religious missions, can best be understood if we see these through the prisms of local communities, as in the case of Islam and the southern Philippine city of Zamboanga (established by the Spaniards, built by the Americans, and a critical hub in the Muslim separatist war against the Marcos dictatorship in the 1970s). Tagliacozzo initially expounded on this theme in his first book, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915* (2005), and *In Asian Waters* he tells us the extensive connections that make possible the sale of "fins, slugs [and] pearls" in small shops in the Chinatowns across Southeast Asia. His field research notes in Appendices C–G are "artifacts" to substantiate his arguments; I suspect he has also reproduced them to get us curious about these linkages.

Scholars point to the different types of mutual compromises Western colonial powers made with Asian chiefs, kings, and emperors to hold on to power despite a shortage of personnel. *In Asian Waters* brings back "structures" to the equation, but this time the most idiosyncratic of them all—the lighthouses dotting maritime Southeast Asia. These supposed guideposts for ships navigating through a region of narrow passageways and scattered islands also functioned as Foucauldian instruments to monitor trade rivals and suppress "piracies." Southeast Asian polities, however, would also use the lighthouses to their advantage and strengthen their bargaining positions vis-à-vis the Dutch and the British.

The book starts with China "ruling the waves" during the time of Admiral Zheng He and ends with China as it appears to "rule the waves" once more. Tagliacozzo hedges as to what would be the outcome, given the current tensions in the West Philippine Sea. But he points us back to his-

tory to provide us with clues. And this, for me, is the last of his methodological gems, where he suggests, “Rather than looking for the big footprint of power on the routes, designed in the form of an aircraft carrier, perhaps it is better to seek out the small” in the

old inscriptions—there are literally thousands of them—that the Chinese have left across the width and breadth of the Malay world, in temples, caves, and on posts, often in the middle of nowhere. They chronicle the passing of the Chinese historically, all of them traveling the routes. (pp. 387–388)

Tagliacozzo suggests that to appreciate this vast maritime world, we must do away with the blinders that fossilized disciplines have imposed on us. Instead of national geobodies, we should focus on the oceans, where there is that timeless flow of commodities, ideas, and peoples that national borders cannot stop. As he put it in a podcast interview:

[I]t is more interesting to watch this movement from the sea because it gives us much more an idea of the fluidity and movement of history, rather than the more stationary ideas of having people bounded by the nation-state and the region. (Streckert 2022)

This is an excellent, extraordinarily superb, and fun book to read.

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## References

- Streckert, Joe. 2022. 232 Navigating the Asian Maritime World with Eric Tagliacozzo on Apple Podcasts. *Weird History Podcast*. July 11. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/232-navigating-the-asian-maritime-world-with/id934222884?i=1000569576402>, accessed March 9, 2023.

## *Marginalisation and Human Rights in Southeast Asia*

AL KHANIF and KHOO YING HOOI, eds.

New York: Routledge, 2023.

The topic of human rights for marginalized people in Southeast Asia is gaining more exposure in contemporary discourse. *Marginalisation and Human Rights in Southeast Asia*, edited by Al Khanif and Khoo Ying Hooi, critically examines the status of marginalized groups in Southeast Asia and the persistent violation of their human rights. The importance of the book lies in its ability to illuminate the current situation of marginalized groups and highlight the challenges they face in their pursuit of equal treatment and protection under the law. The book is a collection of case studies categorized primarily into two parts: regional and institutional settings; and country context