

Sailing Instructions for Southeast Asian Seas

(15th–17th Century) A Virtually Untapped Historical Source

by *Pierre-Yves Manguin*

Nautical literature of a technical nature — Asian as well as European — has so far been left practically untapped by historians of Southeast Asia. Among these texts, sailing instructions are by far the more common. They cannot, indeed, be directly read and used by non-specialists, but they in fact require a minimal knowledge of navigational practices. Whatever the language in which they are written, the general pattern remains, with few variations and additions: "From place A to place B, you steer x° for Y miles (or hours)". However, as we shall see, there is much more to it than just these very dry statements.

Only two Asian languages are so far known to have been used in the period considered to record sailing instructions in a written form, i.e. Arabic and Chinese. We know from various sources that such sailing instructions were used by navigators from all over Asia, but the major part of it would have remained in oral form. Indian nautical knowledge about latitudes,

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winds and so forth, is for instance often referred to in Arabic texts, but none of it seems to have been preserved in written form. Similarly, it seems that Malays or Javanese only exceptionally wrote down their sea-pilots: the only known example is that of the so-called 'Javanese map', a copy of which was made by the Portuguese pilot Francisco Rodrigues in the early 16th century (and then unfortunately lost when Albuquerque's ship the 'Flor de la Mar' foundered off the Sumatran coast in 1511 (Ferrand 1918; Winter (1949). The present very brief introductory survey of this specific literary genre will thus only deal with Arabic, Chinese and

European texts.

Arabic sailing instructions have been known for a long time. A 16th century Turkish translation of earlier Arabic texts was translated into German at the end of the last century, but Gabriel Ferrand was responsible for finding the original Arabic texts, the authors of which were the pilots Sulaiman al-Mahri and Ahmad ibn-Majid. He published the Arabic texts and later translated and annotated them (Ferrand 1913-14). But his translations of these 15th and early 16th century authors are now outdated by Tibbetts' works. The latter carefully collected all the known manuscripts, translated them into English (Tibbetts 1971) and extensively commented upon their contents on Southeast Asia in a later book (Tibbetts (1979).

One small reservation on the use of these Arabic texts is the fact that they provide only scant information on the routes East of the Straits of Malacca, which were no longer used by the Arabs at this late date.

Reversely, Chinese sailing instructions deal principally with Southeast Asian waters. Apart from a few unreliable technical data on actual sea-routes that may

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be found in scattered earlier historical sources and in travelogues, all that has been preserved in written form again dates back to the 15th century onwards. It appears that these sea-pilots were first put down into writings in the wake of the Ming expeditions of Zheng He; but the earliest extant manuscripts or editions only date back to the 17th century — or later —, and do all contain later interpolations. There is no need here to provide an account of the half-dozen such texts that have now been published, as this can be found in J.V. Mills' article (1979) in the *Selected Readings from Archipel 18* (SPAFA 1985). The latter author provides a somehow sketchy outline translation of these Chinese texts. One may also refer to Mills' edition of Ma Huan's *Ying Yai shenglan* (Mills 1970), where further comments on these texts are given, together with a complete translation of these famous 'Mao Kun map' (which contains sailing instructions) and a gazeteer of most of the place names that are to be found in these texts.

The third category, which is that of the European — mostly Portuguese — texts, is so far the least known. The Portuguese, as soon as they started sailing in Southeast Asian waters in 1511, transcribed in their 'roteiros' (or sea-rutters) the information they at first got from local pilots (semingly Malay for the most part) and later on they acquired by themselves during a century and a half of continuous presence in the area.

Spanish 'roteiro' literature, to the best of my knowledge, has

little on Southeast Asia that is not translated from Portuguese. The first Dutch sea-pilot was compiled and printed in 1595 by Linschoten under the title *Reys Gheschrift*. Linschoten had served the Portuguese for many years before turning over all the information he had gathered to the Dutch, and his book is thus nothing but a translation of Portuguese 'roteiros' (most of the originals have by now been found; this, in turn, allows one to provide a *terminus ad quem* for their writing).

Most Portuguese 'roteiros', with very few exceptions as far as Southeast Asia is concerned, remained in manuscript form and are now dispersed in public and private collections all over the world. A few of them, mostly 16th century texts, have been published in Portugal by Brito Rebello (1903), Fontoura da Costa (1940) and by Cortesao (1944; together with the famous *Suma Oriental* by Tome Pires). The most interesting of these manuscripts, as far as Southeast Asia is concerned, is that known as the *Codex Castello Melhor* (after the name of the family who owns it; the present author is preparing a Portuguese edition of this text). This is an original mid-seventeenth century compilation of about one hundred different 'roteiros', ranging from India to Japan, with about two-thirds of them dealing with Southeast Asia. This kind of manuscript volume, as may be gathered from the wide variety of papers and watermarks, of hand-writings, and from the many water stains, would have been passed from hand to hand by the Portuguese pilots plying the Asian waters, each one of them ad-

ding a few new 'roteiros' correcting the proceeding ones after they themselves had a chance to sail on a particular route, etc. The earliest text compiled in the *Codex Castello Melhor* are earlier than 1595 (they were translated in Linschoten's *Rey Gheschrift*).

After this brief survey of the available sources, I will now discuss the validity and usefulness of such sailing instructions as historical sources. I must however start by stating that this is not as yet the result of a completed work, but merely the outline of an on-going, long term research project. I base myself on the experience acquired while collecting in public archives and private collections the totality — as far as this can be achieved — of the available Portuguese manuscripts containing 'roteiros', while using the latter for a study of the historical geography of the coasts of Campa and Vietnam (Manguin 1972); and while preparing the edition of the *Codex Castello Melhor*.

In what way would a systematic edition and analysis of the available 15th to 17th century sailing instructions, and the subsequent preparation of an historical atlas of Southeast Asian sea-routes, help the historian of Southeast Asia?

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Historical geography has obviously the most to gain from such a study. To start with, the bare, factual statements about routes

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leading from one named place to another do provide concrete data on toponyms. As sailing instructions are usually precise enough to plot the actual sea-route on a nautical chart, this will normally help in the location of otherwise unreported or unidentified place names with considerably more accuracy than the usual non-technical sources would allow for.

Winds, currents, geo-morphology of the Southeast Asian seas would have remained unchanged — with very few exceptions — during historical times. Thus sailing routes plied by navigators of various nationalities, at various epochs, would have basically remained the same (allowing, of course, for progress made in navigational techniques). Because of this stability, I believe that a pattern will emerge when all known sea-routes will have been plotted on nautical charts, that will clearly show major and secondary routes. Blank areas will also no doubt appear on such maps, which will result either from navigational impossibilities, or from the fact that a route is of strictly local interest (and is consequently not described by the international shippers).

These data would in turn provide historians with a solid base that should be helpful in discussing and evaluating information gathered from less precise, non-technical sources.

Careful extrapolations into earlier times, again with the help of other historical sources may thus be made possible as noted by Mrs. S. Suleiman in her paper, the mere fact that the South China Sea could not be crossed in a straight line from the Straits of Singapore to Canton — a fact established through the analysis of sailing instructions (Manguin 1976) — is of considerable importance in assessing the role of Campa in controlling the essential route leading from Insular South east Asia to China.

One last topical example of how these sources may be used is in defining the coastline of Sumatra in the vicinity of Palembang. Sailing instructions are precise enough to provide information on the position of a coastline at a certain period in time, and thus to compare it with that of modern times. This is how O.W. Wolters and the present writer — basing themselves on respectively Chinese and Portuguese nautical texts — were able to disprove earlier theories about the coastline near Palembang in Srivijayan times (Wolters 1979; Manguin 1982).

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