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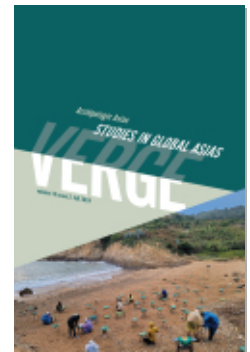
Connecting Maritime Asia: A Roundtable Discussion on Eric Tagliacozzo, *In Asian Waters: Oceanic Worlds from Yemen to Yokohama*

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Verge: Studies in Global Asias, Volume 10, Issue 2, Fall 2024, pp. 43-62 (Article)

Published by University of Minnesota Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vrg.2024.a934654>



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**PRASENJIT DUARA, STEFAN HUEBNER, DILIP MENON,
AND NICOLAI VOLLAND**

Connecting Maritime Asia: A Roundtable
Discussion on Eric Tagliacozzo, *In Asian
Waters: Oceanic Worlds from Yemen to Yokohama*

IN ASIAN WATERS: Oceanic Worlds from Yemen to Yokohama (2022) is an ambitious new maritime history that aims to connect the coastal areas of Asia, from the Arabian Peninsula all the way to Japan, from the early modern period to the present. In this book, Eric Tagliacozzo (Cornell University) takes a synthetic approach to cast light on connectivities—some predating the modern era, some taking shape in the period of colonialist expansion, others emerging in our present day—that show how places, peoples, and cultures along the continent’s far-flung coastlines interacted with each other. Building on a vast body of secondary literature, an array of primary sources, and insights from the author’s own travels and fieldwork, *In Asian Waters* consists of fourteen chapters: an introduction and a conclusion, as well as twelve body chapters grouped into six larger sections that take up major themes developed in the book. The first section, “Maritime Connections,” proposes different views of spatiality, viewing long-distance connections from either their end points (China and Africa, in chapter 2) or a central node (Vietnam, in chapter 3). In section 2, “Bodies of Water,” Tagliacozzo explores modalities of control and governance over oceanic spaces, taking as examples the South China Sea (chapter 4) and the Indian Ocean (chapter 5). Section 3, “Religion on the Tides,” investigates Asia’s oceans as spaces of religious contacts, detailing Hindu–Buddhist traffic across the Bay of Bengal (chapter 6) and encounters of Islam and Christianity in Zamboanga (chapter 7). The fourth section, titled “Cities and the Sea,” offers kaleidoscopic investigations of

the port city as a category, in both precolonial (chapter 8) and colonial (chapter 9) times. Section 5 is called “The Bounty of the Ocean” and is focused mostly on the trade in maritime commodities—marine products (chapter 10) and spices (chapter 11). The final section comprises chapters on lighthouses (chapter 12) and maps (chapter 13) and explores forms of Asian interconnectivity via “Technologies of the Sea.” The book’s chapters do not so much aim to offer a systematic or comprehensive maritime history of Asia but rather function as nodes, self-sustained essays that allow for multiple thematic connections in an open, decentral system.

For this *Codex* feature, we have invited four scholars with different regional specializations and fields to reflect on the contributions of *In Asian Waters* to the study of Asian maritime history and to our understanding of Global Asias more broadly.¹ The contributors bring their own expertise, and each read *In Asian Waters* in their own way and from their own point of view. A number of larger themes, though, emerge in the course of the conversation: the interconnected questions of space and scale; the problem of historical method in a far-reaching, synthetic study like this; and, finally, the issue of temporal scope. In a book that reaches back into antiquity and covers the precolonial and colonial eras of trade and contact in great detail, the postcolonial period, from the Cold War to the present, remains largely absent. Yet, the continuities across the *longue durée* and their legacies for our contemporary moment will be central in the minds of many of the book’s readers. Finally, the contributors reflect on the problem of an archipelagic historiographic method. With its scope and scale, and with its chapter nodes, can *In Asian Waters* itself be read in an archipelagic manner, calling for strategies that decenter accustomed modes of knowledge production and consumption? These are some of the themes that the roundtable addresses.

NICOLAI VOLLAND (NV): Let me start by saying that *In Asian Waters* is a beautifully produced book, and a long one—it runs to almost five hundred pages; the bibliography alone comprises sixty pages. The book’s topic is big, and the scale of inquiry truly vast, both spatially and temporally. To write a history on this scale itself is an impressive accomplishment.

STEFAN HUEBNER (SH): *In Asian Waters* is an ambitious book, trying to do what few books in maritime history have done—connect Yemen to Yokohama. The book’s approach is very much that of maritime history—a horizontal reading in which the ocean connects islands, countries, regions. As for the geographic scope, I note that “Yokohama” appears in the index only once, and just

a few times more in the body of the text. The book's real focus seems to be on Southeast Asia, and to some extent South Asia. Talking about East Asia, China is more present in the book than Japan. This is maybe no surprise, since one can read part of the book against the backdrop of the South China Sea conflict, where China tries to boost its political claims through historical references to its maritime presence in that marine region. The book's conclusion (chapter 14) comes back to Admiral Zheng He (1371–circa 1433), who is routinely depicted by the Chinese authorities as a maritime connector between different parts of Asia in the fifteenth century. This is a historical construct that Tagliacozzo critically examines, like many other maritime connections. In contrast, “Japanese” multiethnic *wakō* pirates, for example, are almost absent from the book, although they operated around the same time, far off the Japanese archipelago. Other pirates-cum-traders receive substantial attention.

NV: With a book of this scale, area studies specialists will easily find fault with sections and chapters of the book in their own area of expertise. But it contains a remarkable number of strengths. I find inspiring especially the idea of connecting histories—the conscious move to think about areas each of us may be less familiar with, by way of their connections with others further afield. To rethink, for instance, China in the fourteenth century through its interactions and connectedness with places all the way to the East African coasts. These are ways of thinking that, I feel, are generative, and where the author of *In Asian Waters* has something to teach us.

DILIP MENON (DM): I think it is important to recognize the genre of *In Asian Waters*. We would be mistaken if we were to read this excellent book as a monograph, rather than as a collection of thematic and connected essays. The parts in the book make it clear that the essays explore the big themes of oceanic history, but through specific artifacts and discourses. For example, the part on religion looks at the circulation of Hindu and Buddhist amulets in the Bay of Bengal, and a fascinating essay on the contest between Islam and Christianity in Zamboanga, a port city situated in the liminal zone where the Philippines end and the Malay world begins. Another part, on oceanic commodities, takes up the lesser-known trade in “fins, slugs, and pearls” (255). The other thing to note about the book—quite a risky venture, given the conservatism of the historical discipline

“give us the facts”)—is the author’s engagement with questions of methodology: travelogue, ethnography, interviews, and archive are blended as Tagliacozzo attempts to render the “feel” of a place and a sense of encounter.

PRASENJIT DUARA (PD): Connectedness as an approach figures prominently in other recent books, such as David Abulafia’s (2019) *The Boundless Sea*, which reaches back to antiquity. Abulafia’s magnum opus is global in scope, starting from the earliest findings of archaeological evidence of human travel on the oceans. It discusses in some depth the sequence of travels, discoveries, battles, conquests, and colonization from the oceans, revealing how “oceans connect”—the name of a project organized by Martin W. Lewis and Kären Wigen at Duke University in the late 1990s. Tagliacozzo gives us a different angle from which to view maritime connections by focusing on themes including religion, technology, oceanic harvests, and, not least, port cities with their inward and outward linkages. While, as he shows in the introductory chapter, many maritime histories of Asia have been written in the last couple of decades, they tend to focus on a particular region—unsurprisingly, because area histories and academic knowledge are still presented to us in such a format. By following the intersecting maritime activities of older and later European imperialist routes, Tagliacozzo is able to present us with a cross-regional set of connections and relationships that are fruitful for someone like me—a China specialist—to learn about, especially from the studies of Southeast Asian connections, east and west. Indeed, it allowed me to see how Southeast Asia was a central and critical player not only in the Asian maritime trade but in global trade. As the sixteenth-century Portuguese writer Tomé Pires famously wrote, “whoever is Lord of Malacca has his Hand on the throat of Venice.”

DM: Prasenjit draws an interesting parallel here. I think the ambitions of Abulafia and Tagliacozzo are somewhat different. Abulafia’s is a fine-grained attempt at a total history, as it were, both temporally (beginning with the Pacific Ocean in 176,000 BC) and in its scope—how humankind, no less, engages with the ocean. Tagliacozzo’s book is confined in space and time (from Yemen to Yokohama in the early modern and modern eras), but the essays are thematic deep dives into themes ranging from cities to lighthouses and hydrography. It is not so much a large-scale maritime history along the lines of Braudel or Abulafia as it is

a very deeply rooted and textured set of essays on a particular oceanic geography.

- SH: Tagliacozzo's choice of scale distinguishes the book from such attempts at a world history of the oceans. He decided on an inter-Asia methodology, on an intermediate scale, which helps to transcend the confines of nation-state-centered historiography, while remaining below global history and its very broad connectivities. In that sense, the book helps to connect the histories of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and does so by including regions beyond the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea, even though Southeast Asian waters are the main focus of the study.
- NV: I think we agree that *In Asian Waters* is an impressive achievement. Beyond the issue of scale, the synthetic project, what does the author argue? Is there an argument? Should there be one? I have tried to search for what may be Tagliacozzo's main argument and came across the following passage, early in the introduction:

~~It would be not be an exaggeration, perhaps, to say that the sea routes of this part of the globe [Asia] . . . are partially responsible for creating large parts of our modern world. (4)~~

To clarify, the original text is from the book, whereas the strikeouts here are mine. With characteristic modesty, Tagliacozzo has added a number of qualifiers to his statement, but once stripped of these qualifiers, I see an important point that is central to the whole book: the sea routes along the coastal waters of Asia and the maritime trade and traffic they carried were instrumental in the making not only of modern Asia but in fact of the modern world as we know it.

- DM: Because *In Asian Waters* consists of interconnected thematic essays, it is not surprising that the author formulates many arguments, on a lower scale, with regard to urbanity, religion, technology, marine commodities, and so on. The parallel here, again, is not with those who argue about global connections and world systems. This is very distinctly a book on the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (taking in the eastern and western domains and connecting them) that looks at Asia's seas through a broad macro-lens, as Tagliacozzo puts it. It is, hence, a fine complement to Sunil Amrith's (2013) book on the extended geography of the Bay of Bengal that connects South Asian and Southeast Asian histories. Tagliacozzo looks both eastward and westward from

the hinge of Southeast Asia, drawing islands and coastlines into the narrative of trade and port cities.

SH: There seems to be an indirect argument here, namely, that ideas from Atlantic and Pacific maritime history—such as found, for example, in the work of Matt Matsuda (2012)—can be fruitfully deployed for the study of Asian waters. And I think that Tagliacozzo also asks how people in Asia understood their own connectedness, via the oceans, to other parts of the world. Let's keep in mind that Columbus set out to find islands—continents were not on his mind. It was islands he was looking for, to trade with—

PD: —and missionize.

SH: The (Western) idea of continents, then, is something that emerged only gradually, but that—as Lewis and Wigen (1997) emphasized in *The Myth of Continents*, or John Gillis (2004) in his *Islands of the Mind*—consequently spread globally. In a similar vein, we see conceptions of the world change along the coasts of Asia, in the places explored by Tagliacozzo. To name just one example: the construction of lighthouses not only revolutionized navigation and shifted the power dynamics vis-à-vis “smugglers,” as the author shows. His focus here is on conceptions of space, which is very interesting—and only so much can be covered in one chapter. But I presume that they also made nighttime fishing and other activities safer and more common, so they had a major impact on conceptions of time as well.

PD: These are good points. But in fact, I don't think there is actually a single argument in *In Asian Waters*. Not all books are based on arguments, especially world history books. This is a book based on the premise that histories all the way from Yokohama to the African East coast are connected and that these connections predate the modern era—because of Arab and South Asian trading networks and, since the twelfth century, the Chinese. What, then, is the book's goal? To show that there is an Asian identity? I don't think so. What else does the connectedness tell us? I believe the book shows us how the Asian maritime trade was a complex web of networks across the region with different agents along the multiple supply chains. Efforts to designate this route as the Maritime Silk Road, as the People's Republic of China has done to possibly appropriate it for the Belt and Road Initiative (see Sen 2023), will have to deal with the variety and complexity of “the life of the maritime pathways of Asia over time” (Tagliacozzo 2022, 379).

DM: As Prasenjit notes, big arguments may not really be a historian's forte. That said, to reiterate, there are many arguments in this book about many themes. However, I would have liked an engagement with the new arguments that are emerging from younger scholars like Jatin Dua, Nidhi Mahajan, Fahad Ahmed Bishara, Johan Mathew, and Thomas McDow, among others. For example, Mathew (2016) looks at how smuggling and trafficking in drugs on the Indian Ocean create a counter-space-time to capitalism. On the other hand, Jatin's (2019) work on Somalian piracy connects the lives of rather un-Johnny Depp-like people (whose ultimate desire is to make money, retire, have a family, and chew *kat* with their friends and visiting anthropologists) to the machinations of high finance and insurance through Lloyd's involvement in making money while the sun of piracy shines. Or McDow's (2018) work on debt and mobility that connects Asian to African and Atlantic waters, bringing together the histories of trade, textiles, and slaves. Tagliacozzo thinks with both the eastern and western Indian Ocean, unlike many other scholars, but what McDow does (and, indeed, Jeremy Prestholdt and Renisa Mawani as well) is to think beyond the heuristic of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic to the histories of "connected oceans." In an important sense, the ocean is a borderless space, and merchants, commodities, religious specialists, and slaves traverse a geography that extends from Asia to the Americas through the imbrication of cotton, merchant capital, and the slave trade. Tagliacozzo, to be fair, is concerned not with the question of an Asian identity but rather with the question of the filiations across the maritime geography of Asia: "south from Nagasaki, west [*sic*] from Hormuz" (1), as he pointedly puts it. We are thinking here about the generation of multiple contingent and contextual identities where there is both a proliferation and a concatenation of geographies.

PD: What I see in Tagliacozzo's work are primarily two themes that can be developed further. First, the relationship between what the author calls continental histories and histories from the ocean. Is there something distinct about an oceanic history of Asia? Is there a relationship between continental and coastal histories, and is there some change over time? The book suggests that there is one, particularly observable with the rise of the British Empire and the corresponding emergence of a ring of colonial port cities along the ocean rim. As Tagliacozzo suggests, most large Asian societies and empires were formed by inland powers

through continental expansions. *In Asian Waters* gives us a different sense of how history is being shaped by the ocean. Technologies of oceanic shipping and naval warfare are, of course, crucial here, but so perhaps are the risks, as the work of Sunil Amrith (2018) has shown so well. Southeast Asian port cities in the premodern period were apparently different from other Asian empires because their imperial or royal centers—such as in Champa, Srivijaya, Majapahit, and elsewhere—were located on or near the coast. Tagliacozzo has developed an interesting argument about these coastal capitals as necessarily having to develop a comparatively fair relationship in trade or tribute with their hinterland. The trading empires depended on resources from the mountains and forests of the interior. The geographical nature of these hinterlands limited the exercise of political or administrative control or coercion over them. Here we see how an earlier oceanic history shaped the political and economic system. In developing their power centers in coastal cities, how did the modern empires of Britain, France, and the Netherlands change the relationship of the coasts with the hinterland? The second issue is, who controls these waters? We get a good sense of the problem of control in, for example, the two excellent chapters on lighthouses and on smugglers. We know of these issues from other regions as well, such as the Red Sea and the Somali Coast, where independent Arab traders sailed their dhows up and down the coasts. After the imposition of colonial rule, these forms of trade continued under the radar, until the colonial authorities started to crack down and rebrand the traditional traders as “smugglers.” *In Asian Waters* documents the problem of control over the sea along the coasts of Asia, drawing on Tagliacozzo’s earlier work. Notably, the contested nature of coastal trade continues right into the present.

SH: A related question is that of the enforcement of European understandings of the Law of the Sea à la Grotius, with its insistence on freedom of navigation. Tagliacozzo brings this up in connection to the South China Sea conflict. And we all know about the violence that European colonialism brought to Asia. But at the same time, the author emphasizes the ocean’s role in premodern, non-European power demonstrations like those that emerged from China, which made use of coastal cities and maritime trade networks. Yet, when we talk about European understandings of the Law of the Sea being transported and enforced in Asia,

we also need to mention the arbitrary breaching of the laws by Europeans themselves, such as the British annexation of the pearling grounds off Ceylon in the nineteenth century, detailed by Tamara Fernando (2022). But Tagliacozzo focuses primarily on mobility between coastal cities, rather than on offshore sites of human–ocean interactions.

- DM: If I were nitpicking, I would say that there is an old-fashioned conceptualization of the space of the ocean; it is clear that the book is Southeast Asia–centric. There is only the gesture of a reaching beyond the horizon. As we know, this is not unusual. K. N. Chaudhuri, in his classic works on the Indian Ocean, idiosyncratically left Africa out for civilizational reasons. In Tagliacozzo’s book, beyond Southeast Asia, the picture gets fuzzy, substituting vignettes for texture, but as I have stated earlier, if the book is read for its stated remit and style, this is not a problem as such. As for the Yokohama–West Asia–Africa connection, intellectual historians have already transcended national and regional boundaries. Cemil Aydin’s (2007) work, for example, brought together Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905 and the fascination of this event for Turkish intellectuals, or indeed Anderson’s (2005) book on Rizal and anarchism that circumnavigated the oceans. So the ambition here appears to be rather limited and worked out in limited ways.
- PD: What about the geopolitical perspective, then? Tagliacozzo seems to acknowledge that much of the integration of geographic space he covers happened under British colonial rule. There are other, parallel cases we could point to—the Mongol Empire, the Cold War, or, in the twenty-first century, the rise of China. It appears, I think, that such forms of integration seem to take place primarily under hegemonic and militaristic conditions, although this is not a point that the author really spells out. Is it possible to conceive of integration without such a militaristic precondition in the “globalized” conditions of our contemporary world?
- SH: The significance of the British Empire is discussed in the book’s introduction but thereafter somewhat fades from view. In fact, there is quite a bit more to be said about the entanglements of oceanic Asia in the imperial project—think of the energy networks, the coaling stations built all along the continent’s coastlines. Related issues, such as steamship building and repair, do not figure in the book. On Barak (2020), in *Powering Empire*, emphasizes the role of coal in the British colonization of the Middle East. This was

not much different in Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Depending on location, at some point in time, coal provided parts of a port city electricity or heat. Coal also was steamship fuel. It powered railways moving from coastal cities to the interior. It transformed port facilities and changed labor processes there. Transport and consumption of coal therefore created the energy network, stretching from the British Islands to Asia, that “powered” British colonialism.

- NV: An obvious strength of *In Asian Waters* is the book’s historical depth. Tagliacozzo focuses on the colonial era, but the book really goes much beyond this period. On one hand, it acknowledges the precolonial coastal trade networks, and on the other, it brings us up to the twenty-first century. Connecting histories not only spatially but also in deep time appears to be a much-needed intervention. Really the only period that I found mostly absent, and curiously so, is the second half of the twentieth century. The expansion of American empire across what is now called, in American mil-speak, the Indo-Pacific shows so many continuities with earlier waves of imperialist expansion and violence. The rise of an archipelago of American military bases, in the very geographic space covered in Tagliacozzo’s book, overlaps with the colonial histories of earlier periods.
- SH: Ending the historical account with World War II may be a fortuitous decision, as the postwar period is well covered by other studies, at least when we talk about maritime, not oceanic, history—
- NV: —but it is the period when the project “from Yemen to Yokohama” bears out most forcefully. *In Asian Waters* is a book about connections and continuities, and I think that it is important to highlight these continuities: first, to acknowledge that these histories of violence haven’t ended but continue into the present, and second, to understand that the Cold War and American empire are not something new and unprecedented but grafted upon a layered historical past—too much of Cold War history is itself ahistorical, in that it overlooks its own prehistories. Third is to really emphasize how important *In Asian Waters* is. Many of the structures and themes developed in the book have enduring relevance that continues beyond the end of the formal colonial empires in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The ocean has arguably never been more central to Asia than it is in the postwar era. China’s rise in the twenty-first century, with its “maritime silk road” (touched upon in Tagliacozzo’s concluding chapter),

is really just a single instance of much larger patterns of both maritime power projection and seaborne trade.

- DM: I think that Stefan is right that the book may have overextended itself by attempting to cover the postwar period or decolonization. But one does not have to come to the second half of the twentieth century to think about the various filiations of empire and the detritus of imperial expansion. In this sense, I would like to put *In Asian Waters* in dialogue with Kuan-hsing Chen's (2010) provocative book *Asia as Method* or indeed with Prasenjit Duara's (2010) essay "Asia Redux." Both of these works engage with the imagination of Asia, the first governed by a political intent (what does the creation of an Asian map of affinity entail?), the second as a work of historical sociology. If one moves to the period after 1945, a major historical event is the 1955 Bandung Conference, which brought together leaders from South and Southeast Asia, East Africa, and West Asia. Tagliacozzo's extended idea of connections across the western and eastern Indian Ocean actually allows us to see the historical underpinnings of such a gathering. Although the map of decolonization is one possible perspective through which to view Bandung, what is usually forgotten is that prior to perhaps even the emergence of colonialism, this vast maritime geography had been connected by trade, migration, and, of course, Islam, as Engseng Ho's (2006) magisterial work shows. The history of Bandung has both proximate and historically distant roots. *In Asian Waters* ends with an exigent contemporary concern, as Nico says: the looming presence of China in the Indian Ocean. It could well have ended with Bandung as the apogee of an idea of oceanic connections, rather than as the beginning of an era of postcolonial affinities (which, as we know, was short-lived).
- PD: Another thing to say about the postwar period is that it witnessed the development of submarine technology, knowledge of the deep oceans, and exploration of its resources. That initiated fundamentally new forms of knowledge of the ocean but also a different history of human use of the ocean, such as underwater mining and fiberoptic cables. The latter, by the way, have a prehistory in submarine telegraphic cables that in *In Asian Waters* do not seem to play a role.
- SH: The book's narrative remains on the ocean surface and does not go much beneath it. For instance, we learn about the trade in marine goods but not about the processes of fishing and harvesting

these goods themselves, which would immerse us deeper into the ocean itself.

- DM: It may not have been the book's objective, but given the new work by scholars like Melody Jue, Philip Steinberg, Stefan Helmreich, and Jonathan Pugh, what would it mean to think more deeply with the "in" in *In Asian Waters*? Wind, waves, depth, typhoons, hurricanes, tsunamis, fishing, mining, and so on. Recent scholarship is becoming increasingly aware of the materiality of the ocean and of the processes and spaces beneath the ocean's surface. Gwyn Campbell's (2019) recent *longue durée* study of the Indian Ocean takes up all these issues. And let's note that the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was formulated in response to the United States' extension of judicial control over natural resources on its continental shelf. By 2011, only twenty nations still adhered to the historical three nautical mile limit, while eight nations had claimed a two hundred nautical mile limit. India has extended its right to the seabed to mine polymetallic nodules to several hundred thousand square miles. As Stefan says, we need to take more seriously the idea of depth in our discussion of the oceans and move beyond the surface.
- SH: Given the time frame, one could even move upward. In the first half of the twentieth century, ships were not the only machines that crossed Asian waters. For example, seaplanes were not uncommon if there were no runways for takeoff and landing. Airplanes and other flying devices therefore created transoceanic transportation networks or helped to enforce colonial regimes that made use of multiple spatial layers.
- NV: Oceanic studies and the blue humanities increasingly try to transcend the ocean surface. I would characterize *In Asian Waters* primarily as a work of maritime history. But it becomes clear repeatedly that the book's author is aware of these other aspects of the "oceanic worlds" that figure in his subtitle. It is up to us, I believe, to take up where Tagliacozzo left off and to explore those other dimensions—the materiality of the ocean, its verticality, the histories of immersion and embodied engagement with the ocean. Melody Jue (2020) offers one model of how to do so, by inviting her readers to join her diving and experiencing media *through* the ocean's saltwater. Margaret Cohen (2022) offers another, focusing on the history of underwater photography and filmmaking. For many centuries, humans have traversed the ocean's surface, but they have been swimming and diving for just

as long. Much remains to be said about the physical experience of the ocean, how humans all the way from Japan to the Arabian Peninsula have engaged with and made sense of the watery depths off their coasts.

- SH: The volume *Oceanic Japan*, edited by Nadin Heé, Ian J. Miller, William Tsutsui, and me (forthcoming), makes use of these oceanic and terraqueous perspectives. And so will my monograph on ocean industrialization since the early twentieth century.
- PD: Although depth and verticality are not of much concern to *In Asian Waters*, I agree with all of you in bringing up these themes as part of “oceanic” as opposed to “maritime” histories, a growing new field, especially, though not only, among Japanese historians. The depth perspective is important for underwater and ocean-bed activities all the way to sovereignty claims, but just as important is the issue of verticality to be seen through the hydrological cycle. This is particularly the case in Monsoon Asia, where the ocean and atmosphere not only generate the monsoons, typhoons, and cyclones but also shape patterns of livelihoods and modes for managing the oceanic effects. Clark Alejandrino (2022), Sunil Amrith (2018), and Emily Yeh (2022) are among the scholars studying the vertical dimensions of the oceanic effects on terrestrial and coastal life. It is precisely the chain of former colonial port cities, such as Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangkok, Jakarta, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, that is most threatened by storms and sea level rise.
- NV: Prasenjit draws our attention to the connection of the ocean and life in general—beyond only human life. Let’s note that the ocean is also and primarily inhabited by nonhuman beings, whose histories remain to be written.
- SH: Interestingly, *In Asian Waters* contains a part labeled “Environment,” but we don’t learn as much about the natural environment of the ocean in these chapters as we do in some of the others. Here, again, we seem to see the difference between oceanic and maritime histories. We learn much about Indian spices in one of the chapters, which then were traded overseas. We also read about trade in seafoods, such as abalone and sea cucumbers, and the maritime commodity networks created in this process. In that sense, consumers had a physiological interaction with what today would be called marine biodiversity—by consuming marine organisms as food or medicinal products. What is not covered in the book is the physiological experience that shaped extractive

human–ocean interactions, such as feeling the physical labor that fisheries demanded on one’s muscles and through all one’s senses. Productive work was one of the main ways, as Richard White (1996) once stated, of experiencing nature and also coproduced a new culture and environment. These activities and transformations happened partially below the sea surface, and “the environment” in maritime histories does not necessarily include them.

- DM: I, too, was somewhat puzzled by the section heading, foregrounding environmental history, when the section actually consists of two fine essays on the circulation of spices and maritime commodities.
- NV: An environmental history of Asian waters would presumably discuss monsoons, the “trade winds” that were so important in shaping the patterns of long-distance trade discussed in Tagliacozzo’s book. At least until the advent of steam power, these winds, as well as the ocean currents they power, dictated the timetables of shipborne travel and the trafficking in all kinds of “goods,” from spices to coolies, that moved across the oceans. In a sense, a history of early modern long-distance maritime trade is itself an environmental history. But I am also thinking of typhoons and tsunamis and their role in the making of maritime Asia, such as the typhoons that stalled the Mongol fleet’s invasions of Japan in what is considered a watershed event in Asian history. Shipwrecks dot the coastal waters of Asia—ships of local traders, long-distance trading vessels operated by Chinese and Arab owners, and many a colonial ship. Subtropical typhoons and cyclones account for more than their fair share of these wrecks. And tsunamis have periodically struck not only Japan but also Taiwan, the Indonesian archipelago, and the Indian Ocean rim.
- SH: The technology section, a very interesting part of *In Asian Waters*, arguably tells us more about the subsurface oceanic environment than the environment section does. Aside from lighthouses and beacons, Tagliacozzo introduces us to hydrography, a tool for navigating the material conditions of the sea. Here we see verticality, because water depth—or the absence thereof—is a life-or-death matter for shipping. One nevertheless wonders how accurate some of these sea charts were, given that, in a time long before satellite navigation technology became available, both the survey ships creating these charts and later the navigators of ships using them had to deal with sometimes substantial accuracy errors in fixing their positions.

- DM: The technology section also flirts with the idea of Foucault's panopticon when discussing colonial knowledge and power, as in the lighthouses along the coast and the question of cartographic control over the seas. *In Asian Waters* demonstrates how questions of security and surveillance were central to both the mapping and the exploration of the ocean. While the building of lighthouses may appear a rather mundane necessity, Tagliacozzo shows how "lighting a dim archipelago" related to questions of colonial development and imperial expansion through lights, beacons, and buoys. The section may add little to our theoretical understanding of the imbrication of knowledge and power, but it reconstructs the "politics of lighting" in fascinating detail.
- NV: Looking back at some of our discussion, it seems that we're all excited by Tagliacozzo's foregrounding of the ocean, yet time and again, we seem to wish that he would have pushed his intervention further. *In Asian Waters* advertises a paradigm shift—the move from continents to oceans is obviously central to the book. But there is a tension at work here that creeps even into the title: while proposing to turn to the sea, the book retains the link to Asia the continent. Is "Asian waters," as a notion, self-contradictory? As an investigation, *In Asian Waters* sometimes seems to dip its toes into the sea when we would have liked Tagliacozzo to wade in or, better even, take the plunge and go for a swim. The subtitle, too, foregrounds "oceanic worlds," but as we have noted, it is more a maritime history than an oceanic history. My feeling hence is that the paradigm shift that the book proposes could and should be pushed further—if not by Tagliacozzo, then by other scholars inspired by him.
- SH: Maritime history often does not talk about the ocean as the site where history took place; the ocean functions primarily as a space that divides and connects—and this is what I feel happens in this book as well. Note, for instance, that the arguments of some chapters—such as the spice chapter—could easily apply to landed contexts as well. But not those of other chapters, such as the lighthouse chapter and the sea charts, when the materiality of the ocean, as a liquid environment, really comes into display. The book's paradigm shift remains a partial one.
- NV: Before we come to an end, let me note an unusual feature of *In Asian Waters*, what the author dubs his "anthropological" or "ethnographic" fieldnotes—observations collected over thirty years

of work and travel in the region. Our instinct, conditioned by our training as historians or literary specialists, usually prevents us from including such observations, although we all have ample experience “on the ground.” Tagliacozzo moves against the grain here, and on balance, I am happy he does. For me, these snippets bring the book alive, and they connect his histories to the present and highlight continuities (such as in the Zamboanga chapter). As such, the recurring references to subjective insights and accumulated knowledge—the most personal form of a scholar’s archive—become a methodological move that, I feel, does important things for the book.

SH: What these snippets of oral history do is also to bring in the voices of subalterns that would otherwise have been difficult to make audible in a book of this kind.

DM: *In Asian Waters* is adventurous in moving beyond the colonial archive and in its engagement with the smells, sounds, and voices of places. The oral histories may add little to the larger historical narrative, but they give us a flavor of what the practice of history writing involves when it moves beyond travel between desks—the archival desk and the study desk. I find that these snippets add an affective register that is most welcome and that is nearly always missing from historical studies built on the artifice of occluding what happens beside the space of research. Many of these conversations in Tagliacozzo’s book alert us not only to the subaltern, as Stefan notes, but also to the subaltern *nous*, as it were, which seeps into the common sense of academic understanding, usually unacknowledged.

PD: The “ethnographic snippets” are good to have, but in a way, they take us suddenly into a new scenario of fading trades from another time. They seem a bit out of sync with the vigor and exuberance of the work as a whole. In general, while there are a lot of interesting materials and insights in the book, the larger themes of the book seem insufficiently integrated. In fact, however, we could draw many possible connections. Take cities, for instance. The book notes the contrast between inland and coastal cities. But cities are also a nexus of power and control, places of religious worship as well as sites where new technologies are first encountered and experienced.

NV: And they are places of trade as well as military garrisons.

PD: Trade seems to be really a central theme that draws together many of the facets that feature prominently in *In Asian Waters*.

- NV: In chapter 5, Tagliacozzo notes that “Indian Ocean littorals often had much more in common with each other than with their own immediate hinterlands” (118), a point that can easily be extended to other Asian coastal regions. This may or may not be a new insight. But I am in the habit of thinking in archipelagic terms, and here I see an archipelago of port cities that stretches from the coasts of Yemen to Tokyo Bay. And these cities are nodes, all along the coastal waters of Asia, that are horizontally—relationally, Édouard Glissant would say—linked to each other. We see layers of connections, across the various registers that the book explores in the six main sections. This archipelagic nature of maritime Asia, a world in and of its own, is something that appears to be central to *In Asian Waters*.
- SH: Tagliacozzo draws here on, and contributes to, the new coastal history in the vein of Isaac Land (2017), which is largely an urban history and focuses on the spatial reach of these cities, from the waterfront to the nearshore waters, but that intentionally does not consider the open ocean and connections of this kind. Another part of Tagliacozzo’s study is interurban history mediated by water. *In Asian Waters* makes a strong case that these long-distance connections, too, are a crucial element in the making of coastal urban centers.
- NV: And in the making of a littoral Asia. And now let me make another suggestion. The book’s various topical chapters, self-contained as they may appear, are in fact interconnected in multiple ways. They remind me of those cities we have just been talking about, that dot the coastal waters of Asia. In this sense, then, *In Asian Waters* is archipelagic in terms of its method as well. The book may not be driven by an explicit central argument, and it may not be organized in a hierarchical, top-down manner. The book’s way of involving us with the questions of Asia’s maritime history itself can be described as rhizomatic, as relational—and it is up to us, the readers, to navigate between the islands of text and make connections between them, to chart our own course through the Asian waters that the book takes as its theme. I have the feeling that the author in fact does what he preaches—and he wants his readers to come around and recognize the merits of an archipelagic way of understanding Asia’s oceanic worlds.
- SH: I agree. The question that emerges for me from such a method and book structure is whether it encourages readers to take in the whole book, from the first chapter to the last. Alternatively,

it may encourage readers to jump directly to those chapters that are most related to their interests. Arguably, one hears the echo of area studies and the author's expectation that a share of readers will look for the chapters directly related to their fields, despite the book's encouragement to understand Asia's oceanic waters as an important region in itself and, analytically, also as a chance to connect different terrestrial regions.

PD: I think Nicolai's description of the method of *In Asian Waters* is very well put.

■ CONCLUSION

What is an archipelagic form of reading? Can a study as vast in scope as *In Asian Waters* also inspire new modes of thinking, writing, and reading that transcend our accustomed forms of reasoning and structures of knowledge? The question raised by the panelists toward the end of the roundtable arguably goes beyond what a feature like this one can do. It is, however, pertinent to the project of Archipelagic Asias as a whole that this issue of *Verge* aims to explore. Where linearity, chronology, and comprehensiveness cease to offer convincing or manageable solutions to intellectual problems (such as the writing of an oceanic history of Asia, traversing vast distances in time and space), the archipelagic itself, with its emphasis on relationality and openness, offers itself as a strategy to pursue new insights and arrive at novel answers. The contributors to this feature are not in a position to offer conclusive proof of this conjecture. But we wish to end this discussion with this provocation, in the hope that readers of this special issue will take it up and consider Archipelagic Asias not just as an object of study but also as a method and an intellectual strategy.

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■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the external reviewer for their suggestions, which helped improve this feature.

■ NOTE

1. This *Codex* feature is based on an initial virtual roundtable held on February 23, 2023, via Zoom. The conversation has been condensed, edited for clarity, and expanded collaboratively by the coauthors.

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