The fall of Śrīvijaya in Malay history

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# ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
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<tr>
<td>BEFEO</td>
<td><em>Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient</em> (Hanoi and Paris)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BKI</td>
<td><em>Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde</em> (The Hague)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BSOAS</td>
<td><em>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</em> (London)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEQ</td>
<td><em>Far Eastern Quarterly</em> (Wisconsin)</td>
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<td>HTS</td>
<td><em>Hsin T'ang-shu</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JA</td>
<td><em>Journal Asiatique</em> (Paris)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAS</td>
<td><em>Journal of Asian Studies</em> (New York)</td>
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<tr>
<td>JGIS</td>
<td><em>Journal of the Greater India Society</em> (Calcutta)</td>
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<tr>
<td>JMBRAS</td>
<td><em>Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society</em> (Singapore)</td>
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<tr>
<td>JRAS</td>
<td><em>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland</em> (London)</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSEAH</td>
<td><em>Journal of Southeast Asian History</em> (Singapore)</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSS</td>
<td><em>Journal of the Siam Society</em> (Bangkok)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MS</td>
<td>Ming-shih</td>
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<td>MSL</td>
<td>Ming shih-lu</td>
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<td>TFYK</td>
<td>Ts'ê-fu yüan-kuei</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tijdschrift</td>
<td><em>Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land en Volkenkunde</em> (Jakarta)</td>
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<td>TP</td>
<td><em>T'oung Pao</em> (Leiden)</td>
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<tr>
<td>YLSL</td>
<td>Yung-lo shih-lu</td>
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<td>YS</td>
<td>Yuan-shih</td>
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PREFACE

This study began, with the assistance of Chinese documents, as a survey of some features of maritime Malay society in order to define the significance of the last thirty years of the fourteenth century in Malay history. During that time the empire of Srivijaya, with origins as ancient as the seventh century, is supposed to have disintegrated. Yet the same years immediately preceded the foundation of Malacca, the famous Malay capital of the fifteenth century. The Chinese evidence suggests that the Sino-Malay relationship, diplomatic and economic, supplies a profitable context for the study of the 'fall of Srivijaya' and the rise of Malacca. Both topics seem to represent a single phase in Malay history.

Curiosity, and perhaps rashness, then led the author to enquire whether any truth could be identified in the opening and strange chapters of the version of the Sèjarah Melayu conventionally known as Raffles MS. No. 18. These chapters purport to describe Malay history before the foundation of Malacca and therefore during the period for which Chinese documents are available as independent controls. An analysis of the historical basis of this part of Raffles MS. No. 18 suggests how actual happenings were disguised or, more accurately, became a rendering of Malay history originally seen from a Palembang and Malacca point of view and subsequently assimilated to Malay historical tradition. Studies of South East Asian history must always take into account how the world was seen from specific places. Regional histories are subjects in their own right and not samples of the history of larger areas. Each region was, for its ruler and his spokesmen, the centre of the world.

The process of confronting the contrivances of the Sèjarah Melayu with information from Chinese sources, reflecting Chinese points of view, made the author more sharply aware of the different cultural traditions exemplified by the two types of historical literature. The Sèjarah Melayu has always been regarded as a mysterious text, but historians of South East Asia, grateful for chance and apparently
unambiguous Chinese references to their subject, must remember that there are often questions to be put to the Chinese texts, especially when they are written long after the events they purport to record, concerning the dating and sources of their information. They must also remember that the significance of the Chinese evidence depends on establishing its own context as well as the South East Asian context to which it refers. The author's conviction of the need for understanding why and how Chinese historians wrote of maritime South East Asia explains why, in this study, he sought to define Chinese dogma about maritime South East Asia.

An examination of the contents of the Sejarah Melayu had a further consequence. The author became interested in the pre-Malacca career of the founder of Malacca, posthumously known to Malays as 'Iskandar Shah'. His career spans the second half of the fourteenth century, which was no ordinary time in the region. Some historians regard the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as a period when the 'Hindu' civilization of South East Asia was in decline. Islam was gaining influence in the royal courts of northern Sumatra and in Trengganu on the Malay Peninsula. Moreover, during Iskandar Shah's lifetime the centre of maritime Malay power was expelled from southern Sumatra to the Peninsula. The presence of the capital of a great, or potentially great, Malay kingdom on the Peninsula was without precedent. Yet, in spite of the unusual circumstances of Iskandar's time, the prince has remained strangely anonymous. Historians, tending to accept the judgment of Portuguese writers of the sixteenth century that Iskandar was a refugee who happened to be fortunate, prefer to concentrate their attention on the later history of Malacca in order to introduce studies in which the pace is set by the activities of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British. The perfunctory treatment of 'Iskandar' has probably been encouraged by the fact that, in spite of his posthumous name, he was not a Moslem and that his 'Hindu-Buddhist' world was about to admit Islam. From this point of view, the prince cuts a fin de siècle figure. But no treatment of Iskandar is more extraordinary than that in the Sejarah Melayu, where no crisis in Malay history is recorded and the prince is portrayed in an almost casual fashion.

The author has come to the conclusion that few Malays deserve to be remembered with greater honour than Iskandar, his son, and his
grandson. These three princes showed exceptional determination and resourcefulness during a dangerous period in Malay history. Iskandar deserves an especially honourable place in history. By his leadership, which seems to inspire the opening chapters of *Raffles MS. No. 18*, he was able not only to found Malacca but also to renew the proudest traditions of the maritime Malays.

An historian has remarked that the modern history of Malaya is almost entirely lacking in ‘clearly defined historical personalities’ and he suggests that this ‘limits the successful attainment of an internal point of orientation of that history’. Yet means are available, within the framework of indigenous value systems and modes of expression, for seeking a people’s perspectives and also for studying the persons who made its history. The evidence in South East Asia is often such that the historian cannot avoid seeing prominent persons through the eyes of their contemporaries and descendants, and the reason is that South East Asian history was shaped, to an important extent, by the influence on their generation of men who were recognized as abnormal personalities. Moreover, the evidence often enables one to sketch stages in the careers of great men, and in this way one can see them in action, controlling their environment, displaying their order of priorities, and earning their reputations.

For these reasons, the author was encouraged to pursue Iskandar’s career, and the study, which began by examining its background, in unforeseen ways moved closer to the prince and to the pattern of events which the prince and his successors saw as being important.

But in spite of these aspects of Malay history, stimulated by the *Sejarah Melayu*, the author realizes that, with its various versions and numerous copies, the *Sejarah Melayu* is also a rich field for textual criticism and that, until much more philological research has been undertaken, the historian’s contribution to an understanding of its contents may be premature. If a result of the present study is to encourage discussion of the ground rules for investigating Malay history by means of Malay source material, the author will feel that he has not wasted his time. Undoubtedly in the years ahead interest in South East Asian history will grow, and indigenous documents, especially those relating to the centuries which have hitherto tended to be regarded as ‘colonial centuries’, will increasingly become the basis for its study. Historians will then have to keep on reminding them-
selves that their eagerness to exploit the contents of a text does not relieve them of the prior responsibility of deciding what needs to be known about the text before it can be used.

The author ends his study with a sense of indebtedness towards those who have already worked in this field. He has the uncomfortable sensation of someone who has spent his time picking flowers in others’ gardens instead of doing what he believes is the present duty of historians of South East Asia, which is the ploughing of new fields of study by making available hitherto unpublished sources. The status of South East Asian history is still such that the student’s working priority should be the needs of the next generation rather than exploiting the achievements of earlier generations.

Several colleagues have patiently answered the author’s questions, and he wishes to thank them. Professor D. G. E. Hall was good enough to read several drafts with his customary good will and to provide valuable criticism. The author is grateful to Professor John M. Echols, who accepted frequent demands on his time with the kindness which those who are privileged to know him take for granted.

The author is grateful for encouragement and advice from the Editorial Board of Asia Major and for the patient handling of his manuscript by Mr John Taylor.

Part of the study was undertaken during the academic year of 1967–8, when the author received funds from the London-Cornell Project to work at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London.

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Cornell University
August, 1969
CHAPTER 1

The problem of the ‘fall of Śrīvijaya’ in the fourteenth century

In 1918 an important advance was achieved in South East Asian historical studies when Cœdès identified the Malay maritime empire of Śrīvijaya, based on south-eastern Sumatra,\(^1\) one of whose Mahārājang, writing to the Sung emperor in 1017, proudly referred to himself as ‘the king of the ocean lands’\(^2\). Śrīvijaya, sometimes in control of territory on the Malay Peninsula, has been ascribed a career from the seventh to the fourteenth century, spanning much of the history of Asian maritime trade and responsible in no small measure for its expansion by providing efficient harbour facilities for merchants making the long voyage between the Middle East and China. Through its harbours Indonesian produce was channelled into Asian and European markets.

Yet the documentation, indigenous and foreign, of this empire is still sparse. Its origins in the seventh century seem to be the latest episode in a sequence of developments since the fourth century, which had ensured for Malays an important shipping role in trans-Asian maritime trade.\(^3\) Conspicuous among the indirect factors contributing to this role was the impeded access of the Southern Dynasties of China (420–589) to valuable western Asian produce, traditionally brought to China by foreign merchants along the central Asian routes. The Malays shared with other Indonesians navigational skills of an exceptionally high order. They were now able to provide the Chinese with alternative trading routes which led to China, to graft a very early trade in Indonesian aromatics on to the China trade, and to establish a system of commercial communications across the South China Sea which never went into disuse.\(^4\) Simultaneously, profitable commercial links between Malay shippers and foreigners from different parts of Asia strengthened the authority of Malay harbour chiefs, and in the fifth and sixth centuries missions from the south-eastern Sumatran kingdom, known to the Chinese as Kan-t’o-li, to the emperors in southern China introduced a millennium when the fortunes of Malay overlords were affected by what was happening in
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