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# Intra-regional social systems: cases of the Maritime Silk Road around the South China Sea Rim

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## Abstract

The South China Sea Rim is a core area of the Maritime Silk Road, ranging from South and Southwest China to Southeast Asia. It has developed a cultural landscape in which all parties are interdependent through very complex processes of ethnic communication and social interaction. In this temporal-spatial process, the cultural exchanges occurring in this area are not only shaping the cultural ecologies of those involved but also integrating their societies. The networked inter/inter-regional social systems lay a methodological foundation on which the South China Sea Rim is dealt with as a whole. These social systems can be defined as a social unit, transcending the lower levels of family, community, ethnic group, nation and transnational region and making up a significant component of the global society. This concept presents a new research pathway to the interpretation of “community of a shared future for mankind” and the “Belt and Road Initiative”.

**Keywords:** Maritime Silk Road, South China Sea Rim, Regional studies, Inter/intra-regional social systems, The belt and road initiative

The time-honored Maritime Silk Road involves a wide range of content and, in popular terms, refers to the China-centered route of transportation and trade between Asia, Africa and Europe with marine and land transit. The ancient Maritime Silk Road mainly facilitated inter-regional trade of silk, porcelain and spices, but on the whole, especially in historical context, it significantly promoted cultural exchanges and social interactions between the world's different regions. The South China Sea Rim is a core area of the Maritime Silk Road, ranging from South and Southwest China to Southeast Asia. Through complex processes of ethnic communication and social interaction, the area has developed a cultural landscape in which all parties are interdependent. Multiple relationship networks have, therefore, arisen and in modern times they extend and flow at a broader level with increasingly frequent cross-border movements of capital, labor, resources and goods. The South China Sea Rim has also shaped a polycentric civilization system featuring integrity and diversity based on long term cultural interpenetration, providing an important social and cultural foundation for the twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road.

Recently, the South China Sea Rim has entered the scope of theoretical study and political and economic practice, emerging as a core zone of concern to national interests. The correct understanding of the basic characteristics of regional society requires

exploration of trans-state and trans-national regional research. It will promote the sharing of resources and humanistic values through consensus of different stakeholders in a regional community of a shared future.

As noted in *Culture, Ethnic Group and Society: Research on the South China Sea Rim*, integrity and diversity are the basic characteristics of the regional societies while the intra/inter-regional social systems, comprised of diverse social networks and symbolic systems, are essential to social continuity. These systems are like a kaleidoscope that provides different points of view to examine the regional society (Ma, 2012).

In other words, all the temporal and spatial processes of cultural and human exchanges in the South China Sea Rim not only shape the cultural ecology, but also have a function of social integration. Such exchanges, including the flow of people and things, imply a stable underlying structure in the region. In a certain sense, the networked regional social system lays the methodological basis on which the South China Sea Rim is dealt with as a whole. By extracting and separating the multiple cultural and social networks from the system, this paper aims to probe into the historical process and the networked structure of regional social systems as well as into the structural characteristics of ethnic group activities.

## **I. Research foundation**

In a globalized society with rapid flows of population, goods and information, any simple generalization at a community level is not enough to analyze the complex intersections of the current world system. In the context of globalization, modern nation-states are facing more complicated border situations and this necessitates the re-examination of nation-state based geopolitics and ethnic cultural diversity. How do border residents carry out trans-boundary activities in different forms? How do their ethnic and geographic identities unfold behind these activities? With regard to complex social systems like the South China Sea Rim and mountainous Southeast Asia, “systematic observations” are especially needed in order to deepen understanding so as to integrate regional social structure, ethnic evolution and cultural changes. There has been much academic research utilizing comparisons and contrasts at community, regional and national levels on topics such as geographical space, the cultural sphere, religious communication and social structures. A major feature of these studies is that they all stress the social linkage, interaction and integrity of South China, Southwest China and Southeast Asia.

### **(I) Overlay zone and transnational social field**

Edmund Leach examined the geographical connection between Southwest China and the northern Southeast Asian highlands in his studies of Kachin society in high land Myanmar. The corridor from Yunnan to India was established in the first century AD. The Shan people settled in the valley, partially for maintaining the trade routes, whereas the Kachin terrace systems traversed across or near the east-west trade routes (Leach, Yang and Zhou, 2010). F.K. Lehman believed Southwest China (especially Yunnan) is a buffer zone and an overlay zone between Southeast Asia and China. Many ethnic groups in Yunnan played the role of “cultural broker” in the relations of trade and political dominance between the two regions (F. K. Lehmann and Zhang, 2010).

The so-called overlay zone mainly uses overlay in two senses: (a) interaction after regional communities and ethnic cultures are re-defined by nation-states and (b) ethnic border and combination. Myanmar's Kachin, called Jingpo in China, and China's Hani, referred to as Aka in Laos, Thailand and Myanmar, fall into the same ethnic group. They reside in different countries, but have kept frequent cross-border exchanges. In addition, people of different ethnic groups frequently travel through the corridor, leading to mingled and superimposed trade, marriage, cultures, customs and religions. People within the region also share property and resources by means of flow, migration and trade through such corridors as rivers and mountain plains.

In the discussion of regional relevance, particular emphasis should be placed on the re- definition of "boundary" and "trans-boundary." Liu Hong used "contact zone" to describe the concept of "boundary" in his system of Sino-Southeast Asian Studies (Liu, 2000). In China and Southeast Asia, the cross-border activities of different ethnic groups form complex social networks through which cargo, capital and information maintain frequent two-way flow. These interactions constantly produce new social networks or extend the existing networks to other cultural and social fields. In a sense, the "boundary" is a kind of status or field of contact, interaction, exchange, collision or even fusion of different groups and cultural and social matters. The increasing cross-border behavior brought about by globalization and regionalization, and the traditional regional networks complement each other and jointly construct a transnational social field between South China and Southeast Asia. These cross-border doers show common cultural characteristics of the region while maintaining their ethnic characteristics. The cultural sphere built by multiple ethnic groups provides an excellent perspective for understanding the historical evolution of the region beyond spatial-temporal limitations.

## **(II) corridor and sphere**

Through studies of historical relations within the Asian region, especially the relations between China and Southeast Asia and East Asia, Takeshi Hamashita advocated the perspective of "Asian economic sphere" for investigation of economic and social relations in the China Sea rim and the national and international "geographical sphere." He believed that China-centered tributary relations and tributary trade are intrinsic to historically formed links in Asia (Takeshi Hamashita, 1999). Philip A. Kuhn introduced the Corridor Niche Model based on historical research on Chinese immigrants and used the cultural corridor to explain exchanges and interactions between South China and Southeast Asia. In his view, Chinese relationships like kinship and township underpin the potential corridor between the place of migration and the place of immigration. The integration of cultures at both ends of the corridor changes the local cultural ecology and fosters a special "ecological sphere." (Philip A. Kuhn, 2008). The Corridor Niche Model not only explains the logic of Chinese community formation in Southeast Asia, but also provides a cross-regional research template for social relevance between South China and Southeast Asia.

Unlike Philip A. Kuhn, Tan Chee-Beng emphasized the "ethnic cultural sphere" in the study of overseas Chinese, which breaks the geographical constraint of region-level and nation-level anthropological studies. He believed that Chinese people around the world share similar characteristics of Chinese "culture," though such characteristics are divided due to cultural localization and cultural changes. The concept of "Chinese cultural

sphere” applies to studying the diverse expressions of acculturation and cultural identity of Chinese and overseas Chinese in different regions (Tan Chee-Beng, 2012). The Chinese communities of the South China Sea Rim and the multiple social networks based on kinship, geo-relation and religion are key components of this “Chinese cultural sphere.” Their cultural characteristics are mainly embodied in the religion, food culture, identity psychology, multinational societal organizations, localization process and the like. Chen utilized a cross-regional perspective to view the spatial-temporal diffusion, flow and change of ethnic culture and, on that basis, constructed a larger community. Community, in this context, weaves a huge identity-based social network that crosses community, state or even region.

The author once used “transnational cultural sphere” to examine trans-regional ethnic groups including Han Chinese. The concept thereof refers to a cultural community of shared religion or the same ethnic group transcending national borders. In the process of globalization, an important criterion for same-rooted transnational cultural recognition is the cultural identity and heritage of overseas Chinese. However, overseas Chinese communities and cultures cannot be simply viewed as an overseas extension of native Chinese culture. On the contrary, they are a result of gradual localization of native Chinese culture through “cultural adaptation” to the local society. For example, the Southeast Asian Chinese community is not “transplanted” from the native society, but rather historically reconstructed in the local social context (Ma, 2000). The production and localization of Chinese culture, to a certain extent, strengthens the cultural identity of the native country, Southeast Asia and the transnational cultural sphere.

China Sea waters do not hinder cultural and economic exchanges, but integrate East Asia and Southeast Asia into an organic network through coastal harbors and open ports. Prior to the formation of modern nation-states, the exchanges between ports were undoubtedly fundamental to the “Asian economic sphere.” Over the centuries, port-centered economic ties and marine immigrant cultural integration and growth in port cities gave rise to a sea-based rather than land-based cross-regional community, which is referred to as “Asia Inside Out” in historical anthropology and Asian history (Helen Siu, 2014). In the process of community formation, goods, information, capital and businessmen served as the major players shaping the “regional economic sphere.” A variety of political, economic and socio-cultural factors interact in the waters and breed new regional relations under the impact of different networks (Takeshi Hamashita, 2006). From such a “marine” perspective, Takeshi Hamashita renewed his view on Asian spatial order.

### **(III) Asia, cultural China and world unit**

1. Region of Asia. Proposed by Prasenjit Duara, the “region of Asia” is a monsoon-driven maritime trade route rooted in the Silk Road. It is a natural non-linear historical concept defined with a bottom-up approach. Asia has been constructed as a social region by different subjects in political, material and intellectual dimensions, in a process called “regionalization.” (Prasenjit Duara, 2014) Helen Siu also believed South China to be a vantage point to illustrate a multi-level historical global process. Wang Hui interpreted “regionalization” with “cross-system society” which refers to a “human community containing different civilizations, religions, ethnic groups and other systems or a social network containing different civilizations, ethnic groups, religions, languages and

other systems.” According to Wang, the regional studies of recent decades can be classified into two categories by perspective: (a) “narration on regionalism arising from nations and their administrative divisions”; (b) “narration on transnational regionalism arising from nation-states and globalism.”(Wang, 2011) The South China Sea Rim and Southeast Asian highlands are more than a “geographical” concept in “space,” but are an organic whole consisting of different civilizations and regional communities. They actually represent cross-regional social systems composed of ethnic corridors, minority communities, cross-border overseas Chinese communities and other different social communities.

The research of contemporary global anthropology offers two perspectives: “to see the center from the periphery” and “to see the periphery from the center.” This has important methodological significance for re-examining Chinese social structure and ethnic group interaction in South China and Southeast Asian Chinese communities (Ma, 2006a, b).The flexibility in determining what constitutes “center” and “periphery” requires re-examination of “South China” from a regional perspective beyond the scope of nation. It facilitates the marine perspective, instead of the traditional continental perspective, to think about the integrity and diversity of South China and Southeast Asia.

As far as the Maritime silk Road is considered, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, which spread in countries along the route, also serve as important carriers in the formation of the regional social network. The transnational network of a single ethnic group is not enough to explain the complex social ties and cultural exchanges within the region. In fact, the region is an integral whole linked by a variety of factors, including nature, culture, religion, ethnic group and market. For example, the two-way flow of goods, represented by silk, porcelain, spices, rubber, electronic products and small wares, is an important part within this framework. Laterally, social networks within the region include the obvious market network and land- and sea-based communication systems, as well as all types of “invisible networks,” such as clan lineage, ethnic identity, belief and customs. Not isolated from each other, these invisible networks are intertwined and linked through complex flows of population, materials and information. Vertically, the social networks can be divided according to individual, group, community, nation and transnational region.

In the 1930s, Bai Shouyi studied the spice trade between China and Nanyang (i.e. Southeast Asia) in the Song dynasty in relation to the development of Islam. Spices were important commodities imported to China from Southeast Asian countries via the Maritime Silk Road and occupied an important position in South China Sea trade at the time. Bai concluded that spice trade “is closely related to the prevalence of Islam in China.” In the Tianbao years of the Tang dynasty, Islam already had a considerable role in the spice trade in the South China Sea Rim. In the Song dynasty, the number of overseas Chinese Muslims increased and they occupied a larger area (Bai, 1935),and, because of the spice trade, they stayed abroad longer, eventually marrying women from the southeast coast. In the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the expanding Muslim population became vital to the political situation and economic development of the southeast coast. Amid the diverse exchanges in the South China Sea Rim, the Muslim communities that were active in different ports created a cross-regional cultural community.

2. Cultural China. It is evident that the link between South China and Southeast Asia is driven by a variety of networks formed by the flow of populations. Previous studies

largely rested on “channel,” “corridor” and “sphere” in the interpretation of social networks in this region and discussion on social mobility in the context of time and space. However, in addition to mobility, stability is also essential to the region. The concept of “cultural China” is an expression denoting the cross-regional community of tens of millions of overseas Chinese. In a broad sense, Southeast Asia has been influenced by Chinese Confucianism due to long-term social interactions with South China. In addition to many overseas Chinese who live in Southeast Asia, the “China factor” can be found in other ethnic cultures.

“Cultural China” is a historical cultural concept initiated by Tu Weiming. It represents the historical results of Chinese civilizational development with Confucian culture as the center, but also shows the process of Chinese cultural globalization (Tu, 2002). This statement, in fact, implies the idea of comparative research and supports the probe into organic cultural links between Southeast Asia and China in culture. In a Confucianism-based society, the homogeneity of society is an important aspect of the tradition. “Cultural China” focuses on different expressions of this tradition caused by differences in local social structures.

In the 1980s, with increased East Asian economic development, attention was paid to the relationship between the East Asian economic sphere and the “Confucian cultural sphere.” For example, South Korean scholar Kim Don-hun noted in *Confucian Cultural Sphere and Economic Order* that the most significant feature of Confucianism is the doctrine that family serves as a basis for social order and underpins the economic development of the “Confucian cultural sphere.” (Kim Don-hun, 1991) Leon Vandermeersch, in his book *Asian Cultural Sphere*, held that East Asian economic prosperity has a direct relationship with the ongoing Confucian civilization revival. American scholar William Theodore de Bary emphasized the liberalism and individualism of Confucianism in *Zhiism and Tradition of Freedom* (William Theodore de Bary, 1987). In East and Southeast Asia, many communities, especially the Chinese community, accepted different aspects of the Chinese Confucian tradition. Anthropologists who focus on Southeast Asian Chinese society are more concerned with the similarities and differences in the structure of the Confucianism-based society. The characteristic parts of East Asian Chinese communities include familism and family organization, kinship networks and social organizations, civil associations and religious organizations.

American scholar G. William Skinner’s Chinese assimilation theory (G. William Skinner, 1957; 1958) is essential to the research on overseas Chinese. *The Study of Chinese Society* (Maurice Freedman and G. William Skinner, 1979), a collection of papers compiled by the scholar, introduced pioneering studies of Chinese in Singapore, Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. These papers drew anthropologists’ attention to the research of overseas Chinese in the 1950s and early 1960s, and demonstrated that social scientists can understand the important elements of Chinese culture through observation of “Residual China.” Recent anthropological fieldwork reports are not entirely confined to traditional social organizations, but also focus on the modern enterprise system. For example, through fieldwork in Singapore and Malaysia, scholars have analyzed the social basis and organizational principle of Chinese commercial companies and emphasized the role of interpersonal networks in decision making. They have focused on the factors of personal control, interpersonal relations and interpersonal credit and held that market is not the sole consideration in the decision-making

process of companies (C. K. Tong and P. K. Yong, 1998). According to these cultural ties, people migrated again to the world, especially to the traditional overseas Chinese settlements in the new migration trend after their form and opening up. A lot of new immigrants chose Singapore, expecting an easy life with language and cultural convenience in a Chinese society. In fact, they interacted in everyday life with different Chinese ethnic groups, such as Singaporean Chinese, Malaysian Chinese and Taiwanese, which continued to reconfirm their self-identification and external label of “Chinese.” In this interactive process, new immigrants took advantage of cultural similarity to integrate into the local community. At the same time, the two sides constantly re-interpreted their cultural symbols and resources. On the one hand, the local Chinese protected their superiority of “more traditional” culture through dialect, behavior, customs, social networks and even political identity; on the other hand, new immigrants made use of language, art and family values to confirm their “more Chinese” cultural identity. This mirrors the division of Chinese people with respect to Chinese culture in the cultural environment of a new era, and the concept of “cultural China” therefore must be carried forward (Zhang, 2014).

3. World unit. In the late 1980s, Kyoto University professor Yano Toru and his research team introduced “world unit” to think about the characteristics of Southeast Asia with rich cultural diversity. In their opinion, the “world unit” is a collection of spheres formed in the mechanics of cultural systems, social systems and ecological systems and has the following characteristics: (a) it is a geographical unit of common space with prominent personality to describe “small realm” in world order construction; (b) the region has common historical memory, regional identity (common sense of presence) and common world view and shares the same values; (c) the inherent social culture is open and results from external cultural interactions, and its integration is the determinant of “world unit”; (d) Southeast Asia itself is methodological and it is a world unit which can be broken down into many small units, i.e. “small world,” such as Southeast Asian islands and Southeast Asian highlands (Toru, 1993a, b, c, d). In the author’s view, the “world unit” is an “imagined regional community” which today can be interpreted as new community formed through global cross-border flow and localization processes or as a new common system of knowledge across countries, nationalities and regions. How do Islamic believers from Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Southeast Asia and Guangzhou carry out their religious activities in Guangzhou? How does new community or spiritual community take shape among people of different nationalities, languages and countries in Guangzhou? In the context of globalization, in what respect do trans-boundary groups (across national, ethnic and cultural boundaries) recognize each other? In fact, the combination of these people is actually a world unit.

The Southeast Asian Malay sphere is a world unit. There are three different Malay spheres, namely metro-Malay (birthplace of the existing Malay sphere), proto-Malay, and centric-Malay. They can be integrated into one Malay sphere as a large world unit. With cultural homogeneity, Malays have a set of concepts on highlands, such as mountain worship, tree worship and worship space. Of course, mountain worship is related to Indian Buddhism. As in southern Bali, people consider the mountain situated to the north to be sacred and the southern ocean unclean (Toru, 1993a, b, c, d). Compared with the land, the sea shows much less ecological resistance, so distant coastal populations and cultures still share similarities and more frequent movement and mixture

adds difficulty in dividing waters. The Southeast Asian coastal world is referred to as a non-centric community by Furukawa Hisao and a mobile dispersed community by Tsurumi. The rich forestry and fishery resources free the coastal areas from the land. Life would not be a problem as long as there is a ship, Yano Toru vividly described (Toru, 1993a, b, c, d).

Natural geography and the activities and cognition of humans in the territory are basic to the region as a whole. A fundamental position of the “world unit” theory is recognition of such geographical concepts as “Africa” and “Southeast Asia” and exploration of “small realms” under the framework of the “world unit” methodology (Toru, 1993a, b, c, d). From a macro geographical perspective, South China and Southeast Asia are integrally connected by gently rolling hills, developed river systems and the South China Sea. The whole region is divided by mountains, rivers and oceans into small semi-enclosed areas such as alluvial plains, valleys, highlands, and islands. This gives rise to a plural and symbiotic cultural landscape. In terms of Madhyamaka, the Southeast Asian highlands connected with Southwest China can be seen as a world unit.

The concept of “wide region” raised by Takeshi Hamashita helps to further understand the South China Sea Rim as a “world unit.” The “wide region” is a research perspective beyond national and local scope and views the region as a whole. It can also be divided into smaller units that, along with their interrelationships, reflect regional development and change (Hamashita, 2013).

The greater society stretching from South and Southwest China to Southeast Asia is an organic integral whole comprised of different small units. These small units include the above-mentioned cross-regional cultural spheres and communities and also a number of culturally and socially consistent blocks, such as rice growing areas, Southeast Asian highlands and islands. They are connected by Indochinese Peninsula mountain passes and rivers and the South China Sea. The multiple social networks, constructed in the complex process of time-honored and frequent cross-border activities, serve as bonds of the regional society as a whole. Therefore, the study of the regional society should not be limited by modern nation-state boundaries, but rather considered in the context of cooperation at community, regional and state levels. The diversity of small units and social integrity of the wide region constitute the core of inter/intra-regional social system. New academic heights can be achieved only by dealing with South China, Southwest China and Southeast Asia as a whole in the exploration of the formation logic of inter/intra-regional social systems.

## **II. Social and cultural foundations of inter/intra-regional social systems**

In fact, the formation of inter/intra-regional social systems rests on pre-nation-state regional conventional inertia which can be divided into natural ecology and human ecology. The social culture of any ethnic group is related to natural, regional and geographic factors. The sharing of natural resources, production and living logics in the common area and within the local ecology serves as the basic premise of social formation. The shared cultural heritage built on daily life provides the driving force to maintain frequent cross-border exchanges between regions. In any cultural tradition, the combination of individuals within the region into internal groups through certain bonds, such as kinship, location, business, and interest, involves the issue of regional social integration. The specific methods and functions of such combination can actually



be linked to different social networks and spheres described above. It is therefore necessary to discuss the expressions of characteristics of cultural traditions and the combinations of social networks in the region, taking into account the fact that modern nation-states reshape the concepts of nation, state and transnational region. In other words, social integration and national integration should be considered in the analysis of social and cultural basis of inter/intra-regional social systems.

“There is no country in the world so closely related with Southeast Asian countries as China,” said Chen Xujing in a study of Southeast Asian ancient history, “China has a time-honored close relationship with Southeast Asian countries, whether geographically, ethnically or culturally.” (Chen, 1992) Geographically, many mountains in South China extend to mainland Southeast Asia and constitute natural geographical boundaries and important channels of contacts in the region. Here live the Miao, Yao, Dong, Yi, Jingpo, Dai and Hani people, as well as cross-border ethnic groups named in a different way in other countries. Their long-term flow, migration, intermarriage and integration create differentiated highland civilizations within the region. Advanced water systems and hydrological conditions favorable for fisheries and irrigated agriculture are another feature of the region’s natural ecology. Rivers of different sizes in the Pearl River Basin link the Nanling Corridor with the South China Sea. Those originating in Southwest China, such as the Lancang, Nujiang and Red Rivers flow through Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand in the Indochinese Peninsula and become the mother rivers of different ethnic groups in the region. The South China Sea connects South China, the Indochinese Peninsula and Southeast Asian islands, and various ethnic groups have actively traveled through maritime channels for business, migration and to encourage political contacts. This natural geographical environment, featuring connected mountains, rivers and oceans, provides common space for the survival of diverse ethnic groups in South China and Southeast Asia. The natural features are hereby highlighted in order to better render their relevance to the different populations and civilizations they have created. River civilization is an important bridge between highland civilization and marine civilization. Marine civilization facilitates the extension of highland and river civilizations and serves as an important channel of communication between South China and China and the world (Ma, 2014).

Southern China and Southeast Asia have forged unbreakable social ties since ancient times. “Lingnan differs from the general southern region and connects with the Southeast Asian islands and Indochina. The large area includes half mainland and half island and represents the majority territory of China and the South in a real sense,” noted by Su Bingqi in *Archaeological Introduction to Lingnan*. In a larger scope, “Lingnan is also related to the cultural relations between mainland China, the Indian subcontinent and the Pacific Rim.” (Su, 1998) The research clearly proves South China’s marine characteristics in geographical location and cultural matrix and its link with ancient Southeast Asian cultures. Archaeologically, South China and Southeast Asia have exhibited similarities in stoneware production and ceramics techniques in the Qin dynasty, and also evidence of ancient cultural exchanges, covering rice agriculture, jade ware production, bronze smelting and casting technology, and bark cloth culture. Based on years of research in Chinese and foreign transportation histories, Zhu Jieqin put forward that China’s relations with Southeast Asia and other regions were not first initiated by the central dynasty, but rather began with people-to-people contact (Zhu, 1982).

National migration and population exchange between South China and Southeast Asian appeared early in human history. The assertion is justified by archeological research on Austronesian origin and diffusion. Most scholars believe Taiwanese “aborigines” retain more of the original Austronesian features. There are also comparative studies on ancient human fossils and prehistoric culture in archeology that look into the relevance of the connections between South China and Southeast Asia in ethnic origin and physical nature. Lin Guixiang has detailed the relations between Southeast Asian Malays and the people of ancient South China. He speculated, by comparing physical characteristics, customs and cultures, as well as archaeological evidences including stone adze, stone arrowheads, stone shovels and pottery decorations, that the Malays originated in Indochina and southern China and gradually moved to Southeast Asia (Lin, 2013). Lin also believed that Austronesians (then known as Malays) are closely related to the Ancient Yue Group in South China: “Malay ancestors lived in South China. Some of them moved to Indochina and Southeast Asian islands and the rest became the Ancient Yue Group in South China. The evidence includes the following three: (a) Malay and Ancient Yue descendants have a physique similar to modern Chinese people in Fujian and Guangdong in the southeast coast; (b) Malay and Ancient Yue shared similarities in language, tattoos, broken hair, snake worship, nesting, seamanship expertise and the like; (c) there are similar pre-historical antiquities.” (Lin, 1958) Lin pioneered the study of cultural relations between the Pacific Rim and South China.

Focusing on Austronesian diffusion, further analysis indicates the association of South China with ancient Southeast Asian culture. With the resettlement of Austronesians on the islands in Southeast Asia and spread to different areas, the Pacific island culture gradually took shape, which internally exhibits wide differences and cultural similarities. The area surrounding the Malaysian and Indonesian archipelago is, for the moment, called the Austronesian cultural sphere. In the north, owing to the Central Plains’ engagement of the southern border, the Central Plains culture gradually extended south, reaching the central region of today’s Vietnam and Myanmar. In the overlay zone of the Austronesian cultural sphere and Central Plains cultural sphere exactly lived the Baiyue people in southwest China and northern Southeast Asia. The various cross-border ethnic cultures defined today in Southwest China and Indochina are largely derived from the Ancient Yue family. Turning the attention from the southwest to the southeast coast, you will find Baiyue culture has not only laid the foundation for the region’s highland civilization, but also accounted for the spread and influence of the ancient Chinese marine culture, also known as “Marine China.”

According to Wang Gengwu, “Marine China” shows a fragment of Asian history, covering the inheritance of the tributary system from the Han dynasty and historical integration of Arab, Tajik and Malay tradewith China (Wang, 2004). In the historical narrative, “Marine China” presents the network structure of ancient China’s foreign relations, what John K. Fairbank called the “Chinese world order.” (John K. Fairbank, 1968) In wider-range civil narration, the southern region is the center of “Marine China,” where, by way of navigation and trade, the coastal provinces distant from the central regime directly stimulate cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world. The major ports in Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang constitute one of the most commercially and culturally active regions in Asia-Pacific and serve as an important social hub of the South China Sea Rim.

As a cultural and economic route, the Maritime Silk Road has, since ancient times, connected China and Southeast Asia and had a direct impact on the network of social systems in the South China Sea Rim. Functionally speaking, the Maritime Silk Road opens up a channel for the exchange of commodities and complementary resources in different countries. With South China as the starting point, it reflects the space-time process of regional integration. It is a maritime route among major regions and countries in Asia, Africa and Europe and a pathway for the flow of tea, porcelain and spices and for cultural ties between countries. Temporally speaking, the Maritime Silk Road experienced different historical development stages and witnessed social changes in different places. It demonstrates the historical process of different nationalities gradually integrating into the regional communication system. Spatially speaking, this maritime passage is accompanied by the spread and mixture of technologies, rules, and cultures in port cities, line-side areas, and radiating into inland areas. In this point-line-surface development process, different regions have been incorporated into the regional systems.

The South China Sea Rim has developed into an integrated society beyond state and national borders, by virtue of its interdependent ecological environment, ethnic kinship, shared honor or disgrace, and socio-cultural interactions. As a whole, the region is underpinned by complex chains of relationship created by frequent flows and exchanges of population, commodities, information and culture. Multiple social networks and associated symbol systems are derived from these chains through long-term market, ethnic group and organizational operations. Together with these chains, they shape the complex social system of the South China Sea Rim. Therefore, the study of inter/intra-regional social systems should start with trans-regional cultural exchanges arising from interwoven flows of materials, population and information and focus on the spatial-temporal process of the cross-system society, so as to reconstruct the Maritime Silk Road as a social process. Superficially, cultural exchanges are a social phenomenon of cultural dissemination, absorption and acculturation caused by complicated human activities. Behind these complex cultural activities is the spatial-temporal process of social interactions among civilizations.

In modern times, regional interactions embodied in social networks become increasingly obscured by the boundaries of modern nation-states. The nation-states, as historical subjects in the new era, begin to create “regions” based on their territory. However, against the backdrop of globalization, the boundaries between countries are bound to be broken by ever-closer political and economic contacts. Globalization has also contributed to the prevalence of regionalism in the twentieth century, such as the establishment of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA). Intricate political patterns and relations of interest urge us to rethink the South China Sea Rim as a whole. Considering the uneven distribution of natural and cultural resources along the Maritime Silk Road, the key to regional integration will lie in the identification of valuable common resources, differentiated “cooperation” and “integration” of multilateral stakeholders, and establishment of resource sharing mechanisms aimed at regional “combination” of maximum interests.

### **III. Inter/intra-regional social systems bonded by social networks**

Fei Xiaotong proposed the concept of “social succession” (*shehui jiti*) in his early book *Reproductive System*. He believed that a society, like a person, has its metabolic process, and an important function of the reproductive system is to help complete the process

for social succession (Fei, 2004). The term *shehui jiti* takes into account both inheritance and replacement (Ma, 2007), where *ji* (inheritance) refers to the continuity of social structure and *ti* (replacement) refers to the intergenerational replacement of social representations and subjects based on inheritance off fundamental social structure. This concept can also be used to explain the basic features of the social system of the South China Sea Rim. “Network is also the bearer of history”, said Prasenjit Duara in a lecture at Sun Yat-sen University on May 4, 2015. The reproduction of social networks from South China to Southeast Asia, in a certain sense, influences the historical process of regional human development. Seemingly, frequent population, commodity, information and cultural flows in the region continue to shape new social relations, and these new social networks constantly replace the old ones. In fact, it is the continued reproduction of social networks that sustain the cultural traditions and internal structure of the region. Relying on the integration of social relations, people create and share cultural values and humanistic philosophies.

The variety of networks shape the basic image of the common memory of subjects in a region by constructing the communities and relations. For Chinese settlers in Southeast Asia, kinship and geographical and business relevance played an important role in their local development, including dialect groups, geographic groups, and relatively stable migration networks like overseas clans. The cultural ties, by way of languages and customs, give rise to networks of business, trade and employment in the modern production system. Relationship ethics, trade networks and practice policies, which are crucial to the survival and development of individuals and groups, also map out the understanding, memory and imagination of local Chinese and overseas Chinese. Memory is reflected in concepts inherited between generations, and especially in the cultural representations of social life. It strengthens people’s in-situ experience and group identity, and this sense of identity based on common memory, in turn, consolidates the existing transnational social networks.

The regional social system of the South China Sea Rim results from the interactions among historical evolution, common memory, group interaction, and the formed local civilizations and social networks. This region was the birthplace of diverse Asian marine civilizations and the channel for communication among Confucian, Buddhist, Islamic and Christian civilizations. From a global perspective, the Maritime Silk Road has witnessed, as a link, the migration of people, exchange of objects and propagation and response of institutional cultures, and shows the historical evolution of diverse civilizations and their representations in multiple networks. In specific terms, regional networks built on historical inheritances continue to reproduce and reshape the society by blending and remodeling ethnic groups, social organizations and cultural matters. The inherited include recognized concepts and ideas and operating logics of inherent structure and social mechanisms behind traditional cultures. These stable elements provide the basis for the probe into the characteristics of inter/intra-regional social systems, while the “inherited and sustained” social network serves as a link connecting these systems.

The seemingly complex and diverse regional social networks have their self-contained development path. Through continuous social reproduction, traditional social networks eventually evolve into independent, healthy and orderly transnational networks beyond the state ideologies and regional boundaries discussed today. In “micro” terms, ethnic identity, kinship, religious knowledge and commercial capital can be obtained in families or clans and sustained through intergenerational transmission. Furthermore, ethnic

characteristics, including cultural customs, knowledge system, logic and traditional habits, are solidified in the interactive process of different groups and performed in the society in different spaces and times. Of course, more “macro” social structures are also crucial to historical evolution of regional networks, such as the global market, ideological idea, and economic dependency between regions. The inherited social networks have spatial fluidity and ductility. In other words, social networks of different types change with the space of activity of subjects, and extend and blend with each other according to family, geographical, ethnic and national identity.

Regional economic interdependence provides the prime power for persistent and complex population flows and cultural exchanges. The South China Sea Rim as a whole relies first on capital and commodity to achieve integration. By way of commodity flow, China has long established port trade relations with the Southeast Asian region. These cross-regional economic links realize the complement of natural resources and imply the operations of different culture and value systems. For example, the popularity of Southeast Asian sea cucumbers and edible birds’ nests in China is related to the scientific system of traditional Chinese medicine and the natural food culture. Jiang Bin combed the perception and classification framework of edible birds’ nests in Chinese dietary culture. Edible birds’ nests, as a kind of food, have medical efficacy and as a gift, symbolize respect and status, and therefore maintain special value in trade and consumption. According to Jiang Bin’s study, Indonesia’s annual exports of edible birds’ nests account for 70% of the global market and are worth 200-250 million US dollars. Other exporters include Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand. In this trade network, the largest and final consumer is China. Jiang depicted the linkages in different modes of production in birds’ nest trade through an ethnographic case study of Sarawak birds’ nests. The monopoly of Chinese businessmen in birds’ nest trade demonstrates the regional integration of the South China Sea Rim (Jiang, 2000). The spice trade is also largely monopolized by Chinese businessmen.

China is a major consumer of spices in Southeast Asia. As early as the Han dynasty, cloves and nutmeg originating in Indonesia’s Maluku Islands were transported to China by different ethnic groups. Even today, more than half of all cloves and nutmeg in the Chinese market still come from Indonesia, despite global commodity diversification. Mountainous island residents, overseas Chinese in Indonesia and Chinese businessmen are involved in this transnational trading network from the country of origin to the country of consumption, which covers all economic operations, including production, sales, transportation and consumption. Thus, the cross-cultural production mechanism plays a crucial role for the orderly and healthy development of regional spice trade network (Tong, 2016).

The discussion of business network evolution in a region should not avoid the region’s historical development and major historical events that thrust and reconstruct the existing networks. The plantation economy advocated by colonizers in Southeast Asia to some extent undermined the inherent economic ties within the region, but the introduction of new species, such as coffee, chocolate and rubber, enriched the diversity of regional commodities. In modern times, rubber has become the main local crop in Akha populated areas of Xishuangbanna in China’s Yunnan Province. A new transnational network has risen along the China-Laos border from rubber trade linked with geopolitical relations, and kinship and ethnic networks (Ouyang, 2013). The modern global mobility of capital, commodity and labor has diversified the trade network within

the region. In an export-oriented economic model, business owners of different ethnic groups carry small Chinese commodities and electronic products to the Southeast Asian market and even further afield. The cross-border trade chains also reflect the complex flow and integration of culture, capital, population and organizations.

As the subject of regional exchanges, people will inevitably stimulate, by means of movement and migration, the diffusion of cultural practices and social networks. As an important bridge for social contacts and cultural exchanges, overseas Chinese groups build transnational social networks that link homelands to settlements, thereby forming a specific cultural ecosystem in China and Southeast Asia. The “Two Families” of Hainan Overseas Chinese, mentioned by Chen Jie, represent a basic strategy of early overseas Chinese to build transnational connections (Chen, 2008). The two-way flow of overseas Chinese includes the voluntary interactions with the home community through visits to relatives, donations and ancestor devotion and the “reflux” due to special political factors. Returning overseas Chinese have learned the local lifestyle and culture in Southeast Asia. In many cases, they failed to adapt to the native places because of the reality of conditions and they accepted the concentrated resettlement allocated by the government. According to Kyoko Nagura, even though the government and the surrounding community ensured the same status, returning overseas Chinese formed a plural-pattern complex community with clear internal boundaries (Kyoko Nagura, 2010). The emotional transformation between “Home” and “Away” reflects the cultural re-adaptation of returning overseas Chinese and identity construction and political recognition from “refugee” to “citizen.” (Yao, 2009).

Chinese and international studies on linkage between South China and Southeast Asia often start with cross-border ethnic communities and overseas Chinese communities along the southwest border with Southeast Asian countries. For example, producing and living in the South China Sea Rim, fishermen from different countries have jointly developed fishery resources in the region and built a sea-centered transnational network. Under the influence of contemporary nation-state borders, the productive activities of fishermen are restricted by national maritime rights. However, cross-border mutual aid mechanisms and exchange networks have gradually formed in the civil society through age-old exchanges among fishermen of different nationalities. In a cooperative study with the author, postdoctoral scholar Wang Libing discussed the flows and cultural exchanges of fishermen in different countries surrounding the South China Sea. He believed that Tanmen fishermen have established an interactive network covering Vietnamese and Filipino fishermen mainly for seafood trade and exchange in Nansha (Wang, 2015). Zheng Shengying focused on household livelihoods and community religions of overseas Chinese in Kukup Laut, a Malaysian fishing village and looked into the interactions between their native places and Southeast Asian coastal fishing ports (Zheng, 2014). The study involves cultural exchanges behind the collaboration and sharing in regional marine production, as well as fishing and maritime rights. On the basis of long-term field investigations, Liu Li put forward that Hainan fishermen play an irreplaceable role in safeguarding China’s rights and interests in the South China Sea. “Claiming maritime rights by defending fishing rights” is an effective way to strengthen and consolidate state interests in the South China Sea (Liu, 2014).

In terms of faith networks within the region, the spread of religion is necessarily associated with population flow and commodity trade. The distribution of Muslims in the

South China Sea Rim is closely related to the trade route of the Maritime Silk Road. Hainan Island, a strategic point in the South China Sea, serves as a hub for contact with Southeast Asian societies. For example, the ancestors of Muslims in Sanya migrated from the Champa Kingdom, Vietnam and some people moved from Hainan to Penang, Malaysia in the first half of the twentieth century. The cultural identity based on kinship, geo-location and religion strengthens the interaction and flow of the Muslim population between Hainan and Islamic countries in Southeast Asia (Zhang, 2012). In recent years, with further opening up of foreign trade, and especially the impetus of China Import and Export Fair, a large number of Muslims have come from different countries to China's southeast coast. With faith as a link, they have established "mobile spiritual communities" across cultures and ethnic groups in Guangzhou and Yiwu (Ma, 2006a, b). In modern times, with the advent of overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, the traditional Chinese religion, Taoism, and other Chinese folk beliefs radiated to areas along the South China Sea Rim. The major religious hubs connect migrants' native places and the Southeast Asian region. In eastern Indonesia, for example, Manado is the belief-based center of overseas Chinese in Sulawesi, Maluku and Papua regions. The religious organizations of the city provide religious knowledge, statues and scriptures for other areas in eastern Indonesia, and maintain frequent social interaction with Putian, of Fujian, through different forms of religious activities.

According to the analysis of trade, faith, and transnational ethnic networks, regional social systems are not the simple sum of all kinds of social networks, but rather a reorganization with fast flow and continuous integration. The study of regional social networks is to examine the time-catalyzed formation under the combined effect of social integration factors and structured activities in different geographical spaces. Relying on these networks, China and Southeast Asian countries have built up mutual trust, cooperation and interdependence and allowed relevant parties to reach consensus in long-term exchanges, towards a relatively convergent value system. The system characteristics, here referred to as "inherited and sustained," emphasize the importance of networks for regional human development and humanistic order construction. The shaping mechanism of social networks and the existing cultural and humanistic foundations inject a social impetus to the common development of the South China Sea Rim. Japanese scholar Tsurumi Kazuko held that "endogenous development" is superior to the European and American modernization mode in stimulating the development of regional societies with their own cultural traditions. In her opinion, endogenous development is the self-disciplined creation of ecological systems rooted in cultural heritage and adapted to different regions according to historical conditions, with reference to foreign knowledge, technologies and systems. Endogenous development, cultural heritage and tradition reproduction in the broadest sense are very important. The so-called tradition mainly refers to structures or types inherited through generations in some areas or groups. Particularly emphasized is the "cumulative group wisdom reflected in the tradition of a particular group." The tradition covers different levels: (a) types of structure of consciousness, including inherited ways of thinking, belief systems, and values; (b) types of social relations, such as family, village, city, and urban-rural relationship; (c) types of technologies for the provision of necessities like food, clothing and housing (Tsurumi Kazuko, 1996). It is apparent that endogenous development results from internal factors, not external factors. The theory of endogenous development has important methodological significance for social development in the South China Sea Rim.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Inter/intra-regional society is the cornerstone of global society**

The in-depth analysis of the formation logic and structural characteristics of social systems in the South China Sea Rim region is especially suited to examining the people-to-people activities in the region, and, in other words, reflecting on the development issue of the regional subjects from the perspectives of social integration and cultural concept. The shaping of inter/intra-regional social systems is also a key part of the global society.

The concept of “global society” was raised by Fei, 2004 at the Inter-Congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) in his keynote speech, “Creating a ‘Harmonious but Different’ Global Society,” which examined the issue of the harmonious co-existence of different nations and cultures in the context of globalization. The concept stresses the symbiosis of different civilizations in the process of globalization, and anthropologists are paying greater attention to the issues of center and periphery in the world system and the dialogue between the two. Serving as the bridge and pathway linking different societies in history, the Silk Road in inter/intra-regional society is an important testimony of the concept of global society. It is re-promoted today in China with the purpose of advancing the communication and exchange of different cultures, regions and societies.

The concept of inter/intra-regional society transcends the social units of different levels including family, community, ethnic group, nation and trans-national region. It has great implications for the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative in its ability to accommodate the boosting of cultural consciousness in regional social systems and establish “mindset order” and “moral order” among different cultures and ethnic groups. Noteworthy is that the basic philosophy behind China’s Maritime Silk Road initiative is the communication and win-win focus relative to different cultures and civilizations as is exactly reflected in the idea of “community of a shared future” put forward by China’s Central Government. President Xi announced on different occasions the concept of “community of a shared future for mankind” featuring the “interdependence of each other.” The key to shaping such a community lies in the regional communities of this shared future. The study of inter/intra-regional social systems in the South China Sea Rim presents a new research pathway for interpreting the strategies of “community of a shared future for mankind” and the Belt and Road Initiative. We hope to take advantage of the twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road to disseminate China’s cultural concept of “being harmonious but different” to Southeast Asia and even to other regions and nations around the world, in a bid to establish a mindset that values cultural symbiosis and creates “harmonious but different” cross-regional social systems.

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#### **Competing interests**

I declare that I have no competing interests.

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