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Examining the Connection Between Ancient China and Borneo Through Santubong Archaeological Sites

by
Wan Kong Ann

Victor H. Mair, Editor
Sino-Platonic Papers
Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305 USA
vmair@sas.upenn.edu
www.sino-platonic.org

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Examining the Connection Between Ancient China and Borneo Through Santubong Archaeological Sites

Wan Kong Ann
Tsinghua University

Abstract

Historical relations between China and Borneo can be traced back two thousand years or more. This is explained by the fact that, although Borneo was not a destination of the highest importance for China, it was, nevertheless, the largest island in the Malay archipelago, and one whose strategic geographic position ensured that it had an economic role to play in regional trade. Borneo has in fact been a significant part of China's orbit ever since the Chinese conquered the South China Sea.

Though there are few specific records, we can trace a little of what transpired in that history by looking at Maritime Silk Road records and reading about the travels of Admiral Zheng He. We can also gather historical information from the ancient Chinese history books to augment our understanding of the reasons that Borneo was never really a backwater region. And now, through archaeological studies carried out in the Niah Caves and at Santubong, Sarawak, we are slowly getting a clearer picture.

Introduction

Borneo is the third largest island in the world and the largest in the Malay Archipelago. On its western flank is the South China Sea, and far in the distance is the Middle Kingdom, China. Today Borneo consists of three different political entities, East Malaysia, which is made up of Sabah and Sarawak, Brunei Darussalam, and Kalimantan, Indonesia.

In ancient times, it was referred to as "Poli" (婆利) in the history annals of China. It is difficult to trace records of Borneo in China, but not impossible if one digs deep enough. There are a number of small footnotes in China's recorded history that, if collectively considered, suggest a picture of Borneo as it was in the past.

In the ancient records of China, Borneo crops up under various guises because it was at various times named "Poli (婆利)," "Boni (渤尼/渤泥/淳泥)" or "Polo (婆罗)." China and Borneo both possess a long history of recorded interactions. Thus if one were to travel through Borneo, one would still be able to see the Chinese influence clearly. For example, the Dayaks in Kalimantan and Sarawak treasure their family heirlooms: big gongs (*tawak-tawak*) and earthenware jars (*tajau lama*). On these can be found images of the dragon ("loong" totem 龙图腾) that originates in China. Much like copper artillery and ancient chinaware, these big gongs, used mainly for dancing and ceremonial occasions, are a status symbol for the Dayak community.¹

Borneo in the annals of China

In the *Song Shu* (宋书 Liu Song History Annals), which was edited by Shen Yue (沈约, 441–513) during the Nan/Southern dynasty, are records concerning the Poli nation (婆利国). *Liang Shu* (梁书 Liang Dynasty History Annals), *Nan Shi* (南史 History Annals of the Nan/Southern Dynasty), *Bei Shi* (北史 Bei/Northern Dynasty History Annals), *Sui Shu* (隋书 History Annals of the Sui Dynasty), *Jiu Tang Shu* (*History Annals of the Old Tang Dynasty*) and *Xin Tang Shu* (新唐书 History Annals of the New Tang Dynasty) all show records of the arrival of an emissary from the Poli nation to pay tribute to China (进贡). In the *Song Shi* (宋史 Song Dynasty History Annals), Borneo was called "Boni" (渤尼/渤泥), and in the *Ming Shi* (明史 History Annals of the Ming Dynasty), Borneo was also most often known as "Boni (淳泥)."

Most records authenticate the tale of the arrival of the emissary of the Poli nation with the object of paying tribute to the emperor of China, the Poli nation being a nation of less developed

¹ Zhou Nanjing, *Study about Overseas Chinese in Indonesia* (Hong Kong Press for Social Science Ltd), 2006.8, p. 31.

status in the South Seas (南蛮诸国). The emissaries invariably brought along with them local products indigenous to their country of origin (方物).

Yan Liben (阎立本 610–673) officially recorded this tradition in great detail in the year 631. At that time, the three South Sea nations, Campadesa (林邑, present-day Vietnam), Poli, and Luo Cha (罗刹, present-day Sri Lanka) sent emissaries to the capital of China, Chang'an (长安) (Figure 1). The prime motive, of course, was to gain favor with the great regional power and in the process obtain support and protection from the imperial court of China against enemies. But it was sometimes more than that. With the betterment of relations with China, great trade opportunities often ensued that profited both parties.²



Fig. 1. "Zhi Gong Tu" (Duty tribute) by Yan Liben (Tang dynasty) (National Palace Museum, Taiwan)

Records exist, of course, of the relations between China and many "sovereign" nations that bowed down to China as the regional power, but there are also some unusual records that involved relations between China and Borneo. In the *Ming Shi* (明史), volume 325, "A Biography of Foreign Countries," it is recorded that Emperor Yongle (永乐皇帝) conferred the honors of rank and honorific titles on specific leaders of Borneo, notably the king, and bestowed upon them the imperial seal, chop, flag, silk, and much other paraphernalia of authority, which shows that the king was present with the consent and backing of the imperial court.

This delighted the king, Maharaja Karna, who brought an entourage of hundreds of people to China to wait upon the emperor and to express his gratitude for the honor. With him were his family, including children, and many court officials After two months in the imperial

² Zhuang Guotu, "Discussion about the "Unreal" of the Pays Tribute System, *Studies on Southeast Asian Ancient History and Culture*, ed. Ji Xianlin (Beijing: Kunlun Press, 2006), vol. 10, pp. 94–110.

capital, however, the king unexpectedly died, leaving instructions that he wished to be buried in China.

With deep sorrow at the loss of a new ally and friend, Emperor Yongle conferred upon him the honor of praising him as a king beyond all kings in the southwest. He was buried with full honors at Nanjing. This public drama and display of affection and respect underscored the importance China realized the nations in the southwest had for the empire.

In the same book, there are also records of the daily activities and functions undertaken by the Chinese on Borneo. In "Wanli" (万历, 1573–1620), there is noted a man from Zhang Zhou (漳州) China with the family name "Zhang" (张), upon whom was bestowed the honorific "Dato' (那督)" in Borneo. This honorific was normally given only to those who had contributed significantly to the community, and therefore it is reasonable to surmise that the Chinese were already playing significant roles in the society of Borneo at this time.

Some court drama appears at this point, however. Dato' Zhang committed suicide after being falsely accused by his own daughter. The queen of Borneo was furious and sentenced Dato' Zhang's daughter to death for the offense. At the same time, the queen conferred honors upon Dato' Zhang's heir and gave him more "government duties" and responsibilities.

After that, even though Borneo no longer sent tribute to the emperor of China, private trade and enterprise flourished. In the *Ming Shi* (明史), volume 323, "A Biography of Polo (婆罗列传)" it is mentioned that there was a king of Borneo who originated from Southern China (王者闽人也). Some speculate that when Admiral Zheng He arrived in Brunei, some of his followers settled there and their descendants became leaders of the nation (据其国而王之). If this is indeed true, the Chinese not only settled in Borneo but played an important role in the history of its administration and rule.

Both these incidents might refer to the same or separate circumstances, but in either case they serve to highlight the close relationship between Borneo and China that existed as far back as five centuries ago.

Apart from the aforementioned texts, in the *Liang Shu* (梁书 Liang dynasty history annals), "A History of the Southern Nations (海南诸国列传)"; *Nan Shi* (南史 Nan/Southern dynasty history annals), "Liang Era records (梁本纪)"; *Bei Shi* (北史 Bei/Northern dynasty

history annals); *Sui Shu* (隋书 Sui dynasty history annals), “A History of the Southern Barbarians (南蛮列传)”;*Jiu Tang Shu* (旧唐书 Old Tang dynasty history annals), “A History of the Poli Nation among the South Barbarians (南蛮列传·婆利国)”;*Tang Shu* (唐书 Tang dynasty history annals), “Poli Nation among the South Barbarians,” there is a wealth of detailed records about the geography and daily life of the people of Borneo.

Most of these records are highly accurate and reflect the way the Chinese saw and interpreted the situation in Borneo at that time. For example, it is recorded that the weather is as warm as the summer in China, that the paddies are planted twice a year, that the island does not have four seasons, and that it is a vast land — all accurate observations for that period.

Records of the way of life and human values in Borneo at that time are even more interesting. A writer described the indigenous people of Borneo as being of dark complexion, having curly hair and sharp teeth, sporting pierced ear lobes, and wearing patterned loin cloths to protect their modesty (“俗黑身，朱发而拳，鹰爪兽牙，穿耳傅瑯，以古贝横一幅缭于腰。”). If we were to refer to a traditional Iban warrior’s garb (Figure 2) and the art of earrings and their associated mores and compare them with those of the Punan man (Figure 3), for example, we would perhaps better understand the description above.



Fig. 2. Iban warrior at Sarawak



Fig. 3. Punan earring art

The book *Liang Shu* (梁书 Liang dynasty history annals) records the deep influence of Hindu culture from the Srivijaya and Majapahit empires. Paul Pelliot stated in this connection that Borneo was culturally advanced and its norms sophisticated.³

³ Paul Pelliot, *Zhenghe Xia Xiyang Kao; Jiao Guang Yindu Liang Dao Kao*, translated by Feng Chengkun (Beijing:

We should note, however, that some Chinese scholars, in consensus with European opinion, believe that the name Borneo owes its origin to the Brunei Sultanate. As recorded in the Ming dynasty history annals, "Boni" refers to Kalimantan, which forms a substantial part of the island itself, but this name is usually reserved for Brunei. The Brunei Sultanate, situated on the coastal regions of the western flank of Borneo, once ruled a large portion of western and northern Borneo. Thus it is natural that, on the diplomatic front, for the Chinese government, Brunei was at that time recognized as the representative of Borneo.

The question then arises whether the name Borneo represents Brunei in this context or the whole island of Borneo. If we approach the question from another angle, any study of the ancient history of Borneo must be referred to the history of Brunei or Indonesia, and not Malaysia. It is clear that in ancient times the Malay Peninsula and Borneo were separate political entities. This is in stark contrast to the reality of the present time, where there is a clear division of Borneo into Kalimantan (Indonesia), Brunei, and the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.

Borneo in the early history of Nanyang

Examining the maelstrom of the mid-seventh century, many scholars are of the opinion that the Srivijaya Empire, which ruled the Malay Archipelago at that time, also ruled a substantial part of the western side of Borneo Island (Figure 4). This meant that Borneo was under great influence from a Hindu kingdom that practiced Mahayana Buddhism from the seventh to the thirteenth century AD. Until the fourteenth- to fifteenth-centuries AD, the Empire of Majapahit controlled almost all of the coastal areas of Borneo except the southwest, in addition to the interior regions (Figure 5). This regional power, the "Hindu-Javanese Kingdom," was very powerful, and it had a great impact on Borneo as regards politics and culture.

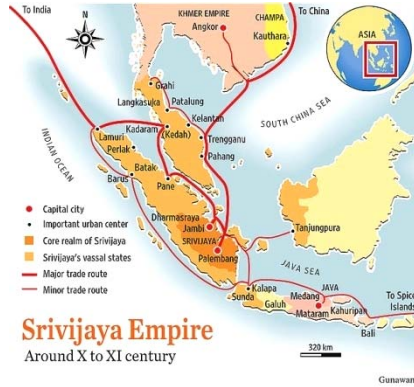


Fig.4. Map of the Srivijaya Empire



Fig. 5. Map of the Majapahit Empire

Both these powerful regional powers had diplomatic and trade relations with China at one time or another. Trade and missionary work were made possible with the easy access to the busy sea trade route. Majapahit went a step farther by using Chinese currency in buying and selling.

In Srivijaya, the locals welcomed Chinese nationals even before trading had actually begun. The Chinese traders generally had a good reputation because they were fair in their dealings, and there was mutual respect in the barter system practiced at that time. During the reign of the Majapahit regime, locals in Borneo showed solidarity with the Chinese, notably recorded in the book of Yuan dynasty author Wang Dayuan (汪大渊), *Dao Yi Zhi Lue* (岛夷志略), which stated that the people of Borneo liked the Tang people (the Chinese). If the Tang people were drunk, they would be sent safely home.

Chinese villages blossomed at the mouth of the Sarawak River at that time. Today, in Sabah (North Borneo), there is a river called Kinabatangan River, which means “Chinese River,” and the highest mountain is called Gunung Kinabalu, which means “Mountain of the Chinese Widow.”⁴ This offers proof that the Chinese people have long dwelt on Borneo Island, and their influence has spread widely on the island.

Archaeologists have discovered coins marked with Han writing, steel sabers, iron hooks, and a great deal of Han dynasty pottery along the coastal regions of Borneo generally and especially on the southwest coastline. This is indisputable proof that the Chinese have traveled to

⁴ In the local Malay language, *Kina* (Cina) means “Chinese,” *batangan* means “river,” and *balu* means “widow.”

Borneo since the second century BC and carried with them equipment, utensils and their own unique culture.

After studying the Javanese and Borneo archaeological finds kept in the Jakarta Museum, Indonesia, Professor Cheng Te-k'un came to the conclusion that Chinese in significant numbers had settled in Borneo since the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD).⁵ I will discuss in more detail the production and employment of commercially useful products and the China industry in Borneo in the latter part of this paper.

Borneo and the Maritime Silk Road

Although Borneo is located in the middle of the Southeast Asia archipelago, traders preferred to use the Straits of Malacca as their route. Nevertheless Borneo was in a strategic position geographically for the Maritime Silk Road trade.

The land route for trade between China and Persia at that time had already been established and was widely used. Under the Han dynasty, this road was extended and connected the South China Sea with the African Red Sea. While the existence of this major route connecting the Poli nation with China has yet to be documented, it is impossible there was no trade activity linking the nation Poli with other countries, especially China, given the conditions prevailing at that time (Figure 6).

The Maritime Silk Road route became more comprehensive and stable with the arrival of the Tang and Song dynasties. Many routes connected China with almost sixty other nations in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. Another sea route offering many opportunities was opened during the Song dynasty; it connected Borneo to China and included the Philippines (Figure 7). The books *Ling Wai Dai Da* (岭外代答), by Zhou Qu-Fei (周去非), and *Zhu Fan Zhi* (诸蕃志), by Zhao Rushi (赵汝适), both written during the Song dynasty, offer many reliable records of the geography and the interesting customs of the southern nations in general, and of the Poli nation in particular.

⁵ Cheng Te-k'un, *Contact Between China and Southeast Asia in Ancient Times Through Archaeological Discovery in Sarawak*, translated by Zhen Ya (Nanjing: Southeast Culture, 1986.1), p. 149.



Fig. 6: Maritime Silk Road in the Han dynasty



Fig. 7: Maritime Silk Road in the Tang and Song dynasties

Professor Cheng Te-k'un was of the opinion that during the Tang dynasty (618–907) and Song dynasty (960–1279), the seas south of China were busy with trading vessels, as was also the case in the Mediterranean Sea during Greek and Roman times. Merchants, monks and travelers were busy along the trading routes, with no obvious barriers to their efforts.⁶ After the Yuan dynasty, sea travel had become a common phenomenon, and people routinely divided the southern seas into the “Eastern Sea” (东洋) and the “Western Sea” (西洋). Brunei, which is located on the north-central side of Borneo island, became the centerpoint dividing the two oceans. The ocean east of Brunei was called the Eastern Sea, and the ocean to the west was called the Western Sea. Thus Admiral Zheng He’s diplomatic voyages in the fifteenth century were called “Seven times mission to the Western Sea (七下西洋).”

Borneo and Zheng He

From “the third year of Yongle 永乐三年” (1405 AD) until “the eighth year of Xuande 宣德八年” (1433 AD), Admiral Zheng He represented the Ming dynasty with a huge convoy of ships that was rumored to be the largest ever seen until that time in many places in Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and on the coast of East Africa. This “Seven Times Diplomatic Traveling” took twenty-eight years. Few complete records exist of its arrival upon Borneo shores. Some scholars theorize that this was an invention of history writers, mere hearsay, but if we note carefully the routes taken by the convoy each time Zheng He’s ships arrived at

⁶ Cheng Te-k'un, *Contact Between China and Southeast Asia in Ancient Times Through Archaeological Discovery in Sarawak*, translated by Zhen Ya, (Nanjing: Southeast Culture, 1986.1), p. 150.

Sumatera and Jawa, both near Borneo (Figure 8), it is logical to surmise that Zheng He's convoy was aware of Borneo, and that it would often have passed its shores.



Fig. 8: The route taken by Zheng He's convoy

China's good neighbor policy regarding adjacent nations helped strengthen its ties with friendly polities. Many nations paid tribute to China, as the emerging power in the region. Zheng He's convoy enlarged trade for China. His armed convoy helped combat the piracy that occasionally was a thorn in the side of international trade at that time. It also helped Southeast Asian regional powers resolve conflicts.

Safety and efficiency were of utmost importance to trade, and these were made possible by Admiral Zheng He's convoy and its influence. Thus it was well received wherever it went. Wherever he landed he would send the Ming emperor's message and gifts and initiate trade with local businessmen. Some Chinese would be left behind to safeguard and protect Chinese interests and to mix with the local population. Even with the eventual decline in the influence of China, and its deteriorating diplomatic relations with friendly nations, China remained a top maritime power, with its Chinese businessmen firmly entrenched in various countries to conduct trade through the established sea routes. Chinese ships plied the shores of the South China Sea, Borneo used the Chinese currency and its weight and measure system, and many Chinese continued to dwell in Borneo.⁷

⁷ Zhu Jieqin, *The History of Overseas Chinese* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2011.1), p. 63.

China and Borneo in the Santubong archaeological sites

There are two main archaeological sites in Sarawak, Borneo. The most famous is the one found at Niah Caves, near Brunei; the other, the Santubong group of archaeological sites, is 35 km from Sarawak's state capital, Kuching.⁸ The Niah Caves, especially the "Great Cave," have provided a wealth of information for archaeologists. Five different cultural patterns in the history of Sarawak thereby have emerged.⁹

From this information, we can grasp a little of what transpired in the past, of how the intermingling of cultures took place, and what the influence of that intermingling was on the local population. We then can understand the more complex underlying issues related to cultures and socialization. It proved, for example, that, apart from local characteristics, the development of culture on Borneo Island depended much on overseas migration from the Asian mainland and particularly from the Chinese mainland across the South China Sea.¹⁰

Niah Caves proved to be a treasure trove of invaluable data providing historical details that were later fleshed out with findings from the archaeology exploration of Santubong. Archaeological activities in Santubong started in the year 1948, earlier than those at Niah Caves, and they were led by the curator of the Sarawak Museum at that time, Tom Harrison (1911–1976).

⁸ Santubong is a transcription of "Si-antu-ubong" in the native language of Iban, and it means "ship of the dead person's soul"; the Santubong mountain is seen as being like a ship that carries off the spirit of the ancestors to the "world after life." Another version has it that Santubong derives from "san choo bong" in the Hakka dialect, meaning "King of the Wild Pig" (山猪王). The first view seems more probable, because the grave found in Santubong is similar to a ship's coffin, and because of the mural of the "Boat of the Dead" in Niah Cave.

⁹ Following the work of Tom Harrison, the School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester, U.K., undertook the "Niah Cave Project" in the period 2000–2003. The project recorded detailed and comprehensive information about the cave. See also Cheng Te-k'un, *Archaeology in Sarawak* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1969).

¹⁰ Cheng Te-k'un, *Contact Between China and Southeast Asia in Ancient Times Through Archaeological Discovery in Sarawak*, translated by Zhen Ya (Nanjing: Southeast Culture, 1986.1), p. 153.

Studies were carried out in six linked sites along the deltas of the Sarawak River (Figure 9). The findings proved that the six excavated sites formed part of a harbor, and that the region's main industry was iron smelting.¹¹ Given the geography of the site, it is likely that it was linked to the Maritime Silk Road and the routes taken by Admiral Zheng He.



Fig. 9: Map of Santubong archaeological sites



Fig. 10: Image stone at Sungei Jaong

The findings detailed in the next section offer a deeper look.

Archaeological finds at Santubong¹²

Sungei Jaong River

This place, 2 km from Santubong village, was once a busy trade route. There is evidence of early silting. Finds at this site include:

- 50 images of humans carved on stone; distinctive carving technique¹³
- hard gangue, iron-smelting crucible¹⁴
- massive Tang/Song chinaware
- stoneware, fine ceramic utensils

¹¹ Cheng Te-k'un, *Contact Between China and Southeast Asia in Ancient Times Through Archaeological Discovery in Sarawak*, translated by Zhen Ya (Nanjing: Southeast Culture, 1986.1), p. 154.

¹² This section summarizes material from Cheng Te-k'un, *Archaeology in Sarawak*.

¹³ The most complete image on stone found was of a figure lying face down (Figure 10). Cheng believes it is similar to the wall paintings in the Niah Caves and people shown dancing in cliff pictures at Guangxi, China.

¹⁴ Probably a relic from a village possibly involved in iron smelting.

- glass bead fragments
- bangle fragments of different origin

Bongkissam (delta of the Sarawak River). 1955 findings.

Finds at this site include:

- iron gangue distributed over a large area¹⁵
- iron-smelting crucible of 3,107 units
- 67,668 pottery shards¹⁶
- 49,393 units of crude pottery and chinaware fragments
- 659 units of glass beads and bangles
- 84 units of metal products

Bongkissam (delta of the Sarawak River). 1966 findings.

Finds from the 1966 dig at this site include:

- platform-like stone construction
- porcelain piece on top typical of the Song dynasty¹⁷
- a small sacrificial altar inside the platform
- box containing 100 gold vessels, half gem, beads, small carvings¹⁸

Bukit Maras (mountain)

Finds at this site include:

- rich hard clinker¹⁹

¹⁵ The iron gangue extended from the bank of the river to a half-mile into the interior.

¹⁶ Cultural stack here is similar to Sungei Jaong.

¹⁷ These could be ruins from the twelfth century.

¹⁸ Burial box with cultural relics, typical of Indian Buddhist tradition, normally found under the pagoda or temple, but also sometimes inside the pagoda.

- iron crucible was not discovered
- 85,582 pottery shards
- 503 units of glass beads
- 152 units of metal products
- 40 crude pottery fragments
- damaged stone Buddha statue²⁰
- Indian tower finial/ decoration
- sandstone tile with elephant and lotus design

River Buah

Harrison believed that this area was developed later. Finds at this site include:

- hard gangue, crucible
- grooved stone hammer
- many small beads, glass bangles
- 11,493 units of earthenware²¹
- 7,028 porcelain pieces²²

Tanjong Kubor (bay)

A burial ground for commoners, because only cheap chinaware was found. Finds at this site include:

- 31,416 soft ceramic segments

¹⁹ Probably iron ore from related harbor

²⁰ Connected with the Buddhism relics box at Bongkisaam, it shows that Buddhist culture came to Borneo before the Islamic era.

²¹ Earthenware mostly decorated with thin rope figure on soft ceramic, similar to those found on the other side of the river.

²² Porcelain pieces from the Song dynasty, with no Tang characteristics.

- 1,383 pottery shards and porcelain pieces from Tang and Song dynasties
- 46 units of small beads
- 3 units of glass bangles
- 46 units of hard product (not iron slag)
- 7 units of copper bangles
- 2 units gold vessels
- 1 unit "Kai Yuan" coin²³

Tanjung Jeguk (bay)

Probably a burial ground for the rich because fine funerary objects were found. Finds at this site include:

- 1,632 units of earthenware from Tang and Song dynasties
- 2 units of beads
- 1 unit of earring
- 5 units of iron hardware
- 1 Chinese copper coin
- 166 units of charcoal²⁴

From the information above, we can see that Santubong was not only a busy harbor but also a center for the iron industry, complete with various facilities. Earthenware fragments and pottery shards found show us that many of the well-known Chinese ceramics were in use here. Much of the earthenware is from the Tang and Song dynasties (618–1271) and the Yuan (1271–1368), but no relics were found from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). This means that Santubong Harbor was in operation for about 600 years and started its decline during the reign of the Yuan

²³ A "Kai Yuan" coin shows that this was possibly a Tang or Song dynasty grave.

²⁴ Placing of charcoal in a grave to keep it dry was already in practice since the Shang Zhou dynasty in China. Charcoal found here probably had the same function.

dynasty,²⁵ and it might have been deserted by the time of the Ming dynasty. We speculate that this could be the reason Admiral Zheng He gave no attention to this island, although he passed by many times.

If not for the excellent work carried out by the archaeologists, it would be difficult to imagine Santubong's earlier status as a busy and developed settlement. It often received migrants from China. They might have stopped for a brief time, perhaps to wait for a consignment, or they might have stayed on and settled down, taking wives from the local community, and lived out their lives here.

But questions remain: Why was it able to prosper as a major industry center at that period? Were all its products sent to China? What caused it to fall into ruin?

And many issues of a wider scope need to be resolved: Was this the first point at which Buddhist and Hindu teachings began to be disseminated? Do the Chinese here have relations with mainland Chinese or the Chinese from other places? Where did they all go after the decline of Santubong? Why are there no relics from the Ming dynasty? Does the "Ming Gap" really exist?

Much work remains to be done to find these answers and to provide concrete proof for the hypotheses we have reached.

Conclusion

Borneo has always had close diplomatic and economic relations with China. It follows that some intermingling of cultures occurred, and some aspects of Chinese culture came to be accepted as part of the local native culture. All this was brought about by the seafaring vessels that plied its busy ports. Borneo and China had a strong common bond because of the ready market for local products that could be loaded at Borneo's harbors, and because some Chinese stayed on in Borneo to look after the emperor's and other Chinese interests at the various settlements and ports. It is very likely that the development and deterioration of coastal communities in Borneo were deeply tied to the changing economic systems introduced by mainland China.

²⁵ In 1281, the Mongolian navy was annihilated by a typhoon on its way to attack Japan. In addition, the "Maritime Restrictions Command" that was implemented by the Yuan dynasty totally blocked any overseas business activities near Quanzhou Harbor. These factors very possibly were the reasons for the deterioration of Santubong Harbor.

It is also likely that China and Borneo overall maintained harmonious relations and were only partially separated during the periods of apparent relative isolation from one another. Emissaries from Borneo often visited China to try to re-establish relations, particularly for the mutual benefit of trade, and at the same time for protection from other emerging powers in the region. Travelers from China were also likely to arrive at Borneo's shores in search of its minerals and raw products.

Occasionally such ties were severed because of disharmonious political realities or the outbreak of war, but the trading vessels never entirely stopped plying the trade routes nor did they cease visiting Borneo as long as there was money to be made. Borneo and China have co-existed well through the centuries — with China of course playing the role of the big brother. This special and unique situation is likely to persevere, so long as it continues to be realized that countries, as well as people, need to foster good relationships with their neighbors.

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