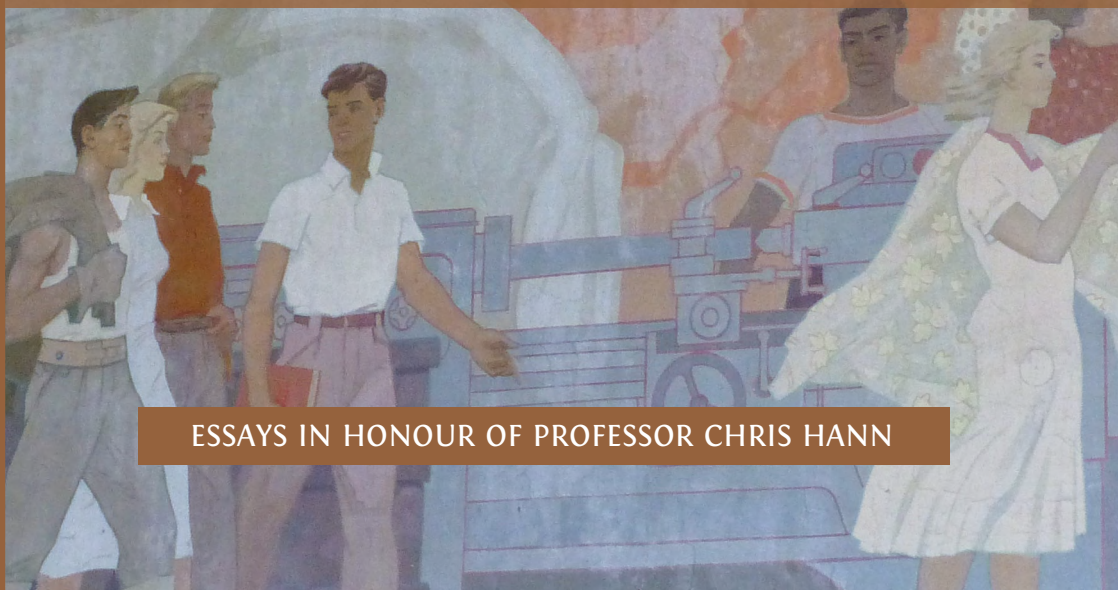




EDITED BY JURAJ BUZALKA AND AGNIESZKA PASIEKA

# ANTHROPOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION

From Europe to Asia and Back



ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR CHRIS HANN



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Cover image: Lenin mural, House of Culture, Temirtau, Kazakhstan (2014). Photo by Tommaso Trevisani. Cover design by Katy Saunders.

# 10. *Transoceania*

## Connecting the World beyond Eurasia<sup>1</sup>

*Edyta Roszko*

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### Introduction

As a child, I often sat and stared at a yellow-grey stone carving that had pride of place atop the heavy wooden wardrobe at the house of my late paternal grandparents in Białystok—a city in north-eastern Poland. The carving was peculiar—two connected vessels interlaced with galloping deer, blooming flowers, and monkeys, both seated and climbing. My father told me that he remembered the carving ensconced in that exact place on the wardrobe as far back as his own childhood. My grandmother (born in 1913) told me that the piece had been in her family for generations. It had been brought to Białystok from Ekaterinoslav (present-day Dnipro, in central Ukraine)—a territory historically contested by the Russian (1721–1917) and Ottoman Empires (1299–1922) and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795)—where she was born and where her father ran the Tsar’s stables. Like many Poles who lived in the Russian Empire at the turn of the twentieth century, her father had found his way into the imperial administration and secured a position that guaranteed a good livelihood for his family. But he had a keen survival instinct and sensed the Bolshevik Revolution looming on the horizon. My grandmother was a few years old when her

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father decided to leave Ekaterinoslav for Białystok. He sold whatever he could and left the rest of his property behind, taking only a few valuables: some gold Russian rubles, jewellery, kilims and artwork. My grandmother did not know how her family had acquired the stone carving; all she knew was that it came “from somewhere in the East, from Siberia”. Years later, when my profession as an anthropologist brought me to Taiwan and southern China for ethnographic research, I encountered scenic and floral motifs in Chinese works of art that I recognised as similar to the carving on my grandmother’s wardrobe. Later, I learned that my grandmother’s double vase was a Chinese calligraphy inkpot and brush holder carved from soapstone, most likely in one of the early nineteenth-century Qing dynasty imperial workshops in the coastal province of Fujian or Zhenjiang. My family probably came into possession of this decorative piece through the overland trade route linking Harbin—where many Poles worked—to Europe via the Eurasian landmass.

I bring up this family heirloom because it serves as an illustration of the interactions and circulations that have connected Europe and Asia through the mobility of people ever since the time of the old Silk Road. More recent interactions brought chinoiserie objects—including the one on my great-grandparents’ wardrobe—into European homes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The chinoiserie fashion admittedly represented the rather superficial and orientalist vision of the ‘Far East’ that had begun to form in the European imagination after Vasco da Gama’s discovery of the direct sea route to India and the consequent increased access to China through expanding European trade with Asia. This vignette is not so much intended to point out the European fascination with the East, but to open up my discussion of connectivity between Europe and Asia, which has much deeper historical roots than Vasco da Gama’s maritime expedition to India or the modest Chinese soapstone carving at the house of my grandparents might suggest. This chapter is about such connectivities, but extends beyond them to a non-Eurasian and non-Eurocentric history of long-term interactions which continue to co-define the world we inhabit today.

Historians tend to characterise societies in terms of empires, geographers in terms of continents and nation-states, and anthropologists in terms of specific localities and cultures. Trained in British social anthropology, Chris Hann, who conducted his ethnographic research in

socialist and post-socialist Eastern Europe and various parts of the Turkic-speaking world, took a different route: he used his knowledge of specific places and cultures to rethink the European continent and the so-called European civilisation from a *longue durée* perspective. Hann shifted his attention from the historically modern cartographic classifications that divide Asia and Europe into two separate continents and culturally distinct civilisations to the persistent connectivities and commonalities across the entire landmass known as *Eurasia*. But for Hann, 'Eurasia' is much more than a continent *per se*. Rather, it is a "'supra continental' unity forged over the past three millennia" that expanded from "its core civilizations to include more and more non agrarian penumbra regions, where quite different forms of civilization developed" (Hann 2016: 2). The concept of Eurasia thus offers a perspective that seeks to escape the binary of Europe and the rest of the world—the West and the rest—and rejects the "a priori existence of Europe and Asia as distinct continents" (Hann 2018b: 17; Hann 2018a; Goody 2010; see also Lieberman 2003).

It was only in the early modern period that Europe carved itself out from the Eurasian landmass as a separate continent, making it the only continent completely connected by land to another continent (Lewis and Wigen 1997: 28–31; Salemink forthcoming). Oscar Salemink (forthcoming) argues that, historically speaking, the idea of Europe emerged through the collection, circulation, classification and exhibition of objects from places outside of Europe—Africa, Asia and the Americas—in the museums and curiosity cabinets of the early modern period, when Europe rose to world dominance. At the same time, the museums and curiosity cabinets constituted the very space where the *representations* of the racialised, non-European worlds were developed in the name of European science and "objective truth" (Gregory 1994). Hann developed his concept of Eurasia to go beyond this kind of Eurocentrism, which envisioned Europe as a unique and distinct continent and as the pinnacle of civilisation vis-à-vis all the others. Nevertheless, when he published his clearest and most definitive exposé of his Eurasia concept in the pages of *Current Anthropology*, some commentators accused him of simply offering yet another type of universalist ethnocentrism that continues to obscure the intellectual and technological contributions that Africa, Oceania and the Americas have made to Eurasia (Hann 2016: 10–20). Hann himself admits that his emphasis on Eurasia implies a concentration on agrarian empires

and, thus, on terrestrial connections, thereby overlooking the important maritime connectivities across the Indian Ocean and other seas. To correct this terrestrial bias, he notes that we need more thorough engagement with the Indian Ocean, including the Swahili coast of East Africa and the southern shores of the Mediterranean (Hann 2018b: 17).

This chapter is not intended to be another discussion of the utility of Hann's concept of Eurasia, but an attempt to take his *longue durée* optic to pose new questions about what non-Eurasian histories of globalisation have to "contribute to wider historical conversations [...] without abandoning the particularism of the ethnographer" (Hann 2017: 227). Hann observes that the prevailing present-centric approach in social science tends to look at historically "shallow temporalities" of the modern globalised world, rarely extending beyond the reach of the memory of elderly informants. To remedy the lack of any serious scrutiny of the present as a historical outcome, Hann advocates engaging with world history and contextualising ethnographic data "with regard to long-term patterns of socio-cultural resilience and transformation" (Hann 2017: 226–227). At the same time, he warns that even global history is too often trapped in Eurocentric narratives and Western geographical imaginaries that have become hegemonic on a universal scale, something that is imaginatively captured in Michel-Rolph Trouillot's concept of North Atlantic universals (2002). As a former student of Chris Hann, I started my anthropological endeavours with a localised focus on religious practices among coastal communities in central Vietnam, but moved on to global competitions over resources, starting with the South China Sea and gradually expanding outward. Consequently, I find myself closer than ever to Hann's injunction to combine ethnography with deep history and even archaeology—a point I will develop later. I agree with Hann that it is important to destabilise Western narratives of modernity grounded in a European continental pedigree, but I also believe that engaging with global history from the perspective of the sea and archipelagos might be a way to add depth and complexity to the terrestrial bias in his narrative of Eurasian historical connectivities (Trouillot 2002; Gilroy 1993; DeLoughrey 2007). While I take inspiration from Hann's concept of Eurasia and his focus on interconnectedness and commonalities within Eurasia, I wish to pose a different question: What can we learn about long-term exchanges and

interactions if we turn to the ocean instead of the Eurasian landmass as the basis for an alternative global history? To answer this question, I address sea-borne oceanic connectivity *before, during* and *after* the age of European expansion and supremacy, and embrace the discovery that all seas and oceans are in fact a single global ocean.

Following the *Ocean Literacy Framework*, which defines ‘the ocean’ as “one interconnected circulation system powered by wind, tides, the force of the Earth’s rotation (Coriolis effect), the Sun, and water density differences”, I conceive of all the planet’s oceans as a single ocean with many ocean basins, including the Atlantic, Indian, Pacific, Southern and Arctic. Taking the singularity of the globally interconnected ocean instead of the Eurasian continent as a starting point, I propose, in parallel to Eurasia, the concept of *Transoceania* to foreground the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific basins and the peoples who navigate them and have always been mobile. In doing so, I extend the continental and ocean worlds beyond territorially bounded empires, nation-states and inward-looking national histories. *Transoceania* thus is not a place, but a spatio-temporal construct that captures people’s marine and maritime mobilities in past and present, thereby connecting vernacular geographies and histories that straddle both ocean basins and continents. I do not claim by any means that this is new. Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, in his response to Hann’s concept of Eurasia, offers the example of the tight wooden world of the sailing ship, where labour flows of “sailors, pirates, and slaves disseminated ideas of freedom and societies without state, class division, and exploitation across the Atlantic in a triangle formed by Africa, the Americas and Europe, influencing Northern radical imaginaries” (Ribeiro in Hann 2016: 17; Rediker 1987; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Taylor 1988; Gilroy 1993). In *The Graves of Tarim*, Engseng Ho (2006) brilliantly narrates the “local cosmopolitanism” of Hadrami Yemen migrants who settled down in Arabia, India and Southeast Asia, becoming locals while remaining cosmopolitans with their connections across the sea. Drawing on history, archaeology and geography, Burkhard Schnepel and Edward Alpers (2018) trace the connections and interactions between small islands in the Indian Ocean, where migrant histories of labour, slavery and cosmopolitanisms traverse littoral empires and nation-states.

The transoceanic perspective thus helps us to avoid a Eurocentric “territorial trap” (Agnew 1994) and to recover subaltern historiographies which would otherwise remain concealed. By attending to these subaltern historiographies not from the terrestrial core of the continent but from its ragged edges—coasts, islands and archipelagos—we are able to chart the hidden contours of vernacular geographies that contest the linear perspective of Eurasian chronological history and rigid modern claims of bounded territory, ethnicity and nationality. The next part of this chapter turns precisely to these ragged edges connected not by the lines of modern cartography, but by human mobility.

### Mobile Maritime Peoples, not Empires

Jack Goody aptly pointed out the arrogance of Europeans who tend to think of themselves as having first “‘discovered’ and ‘explored’ the world” (Goody 2010: 60). Indeed, in geography lessons in high school, most of us learned that Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama were those who discovered ‘new continents’ and opened the ocean to European trade and colonisation, but we learn almost nothing about those who left no written records of their voyages. But these ancient mariners who sailed their outrigger canoes and dhows by the stars, clouds and waves in the open ocean left other evidence that modern science is recovering and interpreting, albeit on a steep learning curve. Linguistic, ethnographic, genetic and bio-archaeological findings suggest that neither the fifteenth-century European explorers nor their famous antecedent—the Ming-era admiral Zheng He, who reached the East African Coast at the beginning of the fifteenth century—had a monopoly on transoceanic voyages (Goody 2010: 60; see also Wade 2005; Sen 2016). The inventors of long-distance navigation were Austronesian-speaking seafarers who probably originated in what today is southern China or Taiwan and now populate most of insular Southeast Asia and the Pacific. More than five millennia ago they started the most extraordinary series of voyages of discovery and settlement in all of human history (Roszko 2021a: 297; Dening 2007).

Over the next thousand years, they spread south through the Philippines to Sulawesi, the Moluccas, northern Borneo and eastern Java. Two thousand years ago they sailed from Southeast Asia as far as



Madagascar in the Indian Ocean and Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean (Crowther et al. 2016). Aotearoa, now known as New Zealand, was probably the land they settled last, arriving there around 1300 CE. This was not a single wave of migration, but a staggered series of voyages that took place in stages. For example, while it is known that Madagascar is populated by Austronesian speakers, new archaeobotanical evidence suggests that Austronesians settled in mainland Africa and the Comoros archipelago before they translocated to Madagascar (Crowther et al. 2016: 6639). Navigating oceans and seas was not just a matter of contacting new people, but more often a matter of renewing already existing ties and networks (Tagliacozzo 2009: 114). There are accounts indicating that during the first millennium and a half of the Common Era, peoples from the Indonesian archipelago still retained commercial contact with Madagascar (Reid 2015: 64). When the first generation of Portuguese travellers arrived in Madagascar in the mid-1500s, they also encountered the memory of this long-ago travel and connection with Southeast Asian people described as from “Jawa” (Reid 2015: 64). To this day, across the Indonesian archipelago, the Malayo-Austronesian term *merantau*—referring to travel and diasporic connectivity—persists both in practice and in narrative (Salazar 2016). Anthropologists also argue that a pre-thirteenth-century trade route plied by Austronesians (most likely Malagasy) might have extended from Madagascar to southern Arabia via the Swahili coast. The archaeobotanical record, which includes plants collected in Madagascar and on the coast of the East African mainland (Crowther et al. 2016), is complemented by Ibn al-Mujawir’s early thirteenth-century account of the western and southern areas of the Arabian Peninsula, which provides some clues about the mobility and networks of Austronesian speakers. On his journey to Aden around 1230, Ibn al-Mujawir noted that people from “al Qumr”—which is present-day Madagascar—travelled between the island of Kilwa (off the coast of what is now Tanzania), Mogadishu and Aden using outrigger canoes, which suggests their Austronesian origins (Fleisher et al. 2015: 107; Smith 2008).

Anthropologists speculate that these mariners might have paid regular visits to the old port of Sharma (in what is now Yemen) and other southern Arabian ports, and it is even possible that east-African traders and other maritime labourers travelled aboard Austronesian

vessels and Arabo-Persian ships (Fleisher et al. 2015: 107). Other botanical evidence links Southeast Asians with Polynesian peoples, but some anthropologists have long argued that Polynesians might also have some Native American ancestry, pointing to the existence of crops native to the Americas in Polynesia (Ioannidis et al. 2020). Furthermore, the recent analysis of genome-wide variation in individuals from islands across the Pacific provides indisputable genetic evidence of prehistoric contact between Polynesians and South Americans more than a millennium ago (Ioannidis et al. 2020). While some archaeologists argue that South Americans reached eastern Polynesia, bringing their native crops, stoneworking skills and certain cults with them, the question of whether it was Polynesians who sailed east to South America and back or South Americans who sailed west remains open (Wallin 2020: 1). Both possibilities seem to fit the genetic data (Ioannidis et al. 2020). In tracing the human history of the ocean and its connectivity, we should not forget about expeditions made by groups of Amerindian mariners who ventured far beyond the continental mainland to reach the Caribbean islands about 4000 BCE. In northern Europe, the Vikings sailed across the north Atlantic between the eighth and eleventh centuries, reaching Iceland, Greenland and Newfoundland to the west, as far south as North Africa and the Mediterranean, and as far east as Russia (Kiev), Constantinople and the Middle East (Brink 2008). These European Vikings find their parallel in the Cham seafarers of early Southeast Asia. Much as the Cham—an Austronesian-speaking seafaring group in what is now central Vietnam—never formed a unified kingdom and drew on ethnically diverse maritime peoples to mount their naval attacks (Hall 2011: 80; Hardy and Nguyễn Tien Đông 2019), so the Vikings' maritime raids were made by seafaring warriors hailing not only from Scandinavia, but from other places as well. A recent genetic study shows that Vikings who originated in what today is Sweden did not form a singular 'Viking world', but actually constituted multiple worlds with a large proportion of Southern European and Asian ancestry, thereby demonstrating large-scale connectivity facilitated by sea-borne mobility (Margaryan et al. 2020).

The Indian writer and trained anthropologist Amitav Ghosh confessed that he yearns “for a certain kind of universalism—not a universalism merely of principles and philosophy, but one of face-to-face

encounters, of everyday experience" (2009: 37). Ghosh connected this kind of yearning, "the affinity for strangers", to the spirit of the Non-Aligned Movement—a forum of so-called developing states that sought to navigate a world divided during the Cold War and which was characterised by the ethos of decolonisation and "deep historical roots and powerful cultural resonances". In the field of culture, Ghosh (2009: 37–38) says this kind of xenophilia "represented an attempt to restore and recommence the exchanges and conversations that had been interrupted by the long centuries of European imperial dominance" but that had, in reality, never ceased. As I have indicated, these exchanges and conversations stretch back to the ancient mariners who navigated the Indian and Pacific oceans and the Caribbean, but they also extend to the commerce and communications that once linked Yemen and China, Indonesia and East Africa, India and the Middle East (Ghosh 2009: 37–38), as I discuss in the next section.

## The Ocean Worlds

It was historians rather than anthropologists who turned to the oceans and seas as a unit of analysis in mapping the kind of universalism that builds on long-standing sea-borne interactions and exchanges. The best example of that approach is Fernand Braudel's (1972) seminal work on the 'Mediterranean World' and the rise of civilisations, which drew on the fragmented geographies of peninsulas and seas and their connection to hinterlands. From a Braudelian perspective, the Roman Empire was terrestrial, but it was also and above all a maritime empire entirely centred on the Mediterranean, which formed the geographic core of the empire. In fact, the Mediterranean Sea was so important to the Romans that they referred to it simply as *Mare Nostrum* ('Our Sea'). In this connection it is worth remembering that the British Empire was a maritime empire consisting of non-contiguous territories connected by transoceanic shipping. More importantly, Braudel's panoramic view of the Mediterranean as a unifying and integrating entity gave new impetus to scholars—including Goody—to shift their focus from the scale of the nation to a broader regional perspective (Roszko 2021a: 304). For example, scholars such as Anthony Reid (1988; 1993; 1999), Denys Lombard (2007) and Heather Sutherland (2003) looked at the

Mediterranean as a model for understanding Southeast Asia. According to this model, China and Southeast Asia are connected across the South China Sea, which integrates them geographically and economically (Sutherland 2003). Anthony Reid proposed the concept of the ‘Malay World’—a reference to ancient polities and cultural zones that extended beyond the present-day borders of nation-states—to emphasise the significance of maritime trading connections and networks spanning the Southeast Asia region and southern China (Reid 1988; 1993; 1999; 2004). Gwyn Campbell (2019) went even further, championing the idea of the ‘Indian Ocean World’, which encompasses the Malay World, China, Africa, and the Middle East through multi-layered connections, whether genetic, botanical, technological, cultural or economic. Recently, tracing the mobility of seafarers, slaves, soldiers, migrants, labourers and convicts who moved around, between and across polities, colonies and empires, Clare Anderson (2012) brought the “subaltern lives in the Indian Ocean World” to our attention. By triangulating the transnational archives of penal colonies and prisons with ethnography, Anderson was able to bring the richness of these sea-borne histories against and “along the archival grain” (see also Stoler 2009). The Mediterranean analogy thus liberated scholars from the straitjacket of “political borders”, opening a new avenue for the exploration of connections and borrowings, continuity and change beyond the rigid national, regional or continental frames (Sutherland 2003; see also Lewis and Wigen 1997).<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on Braudel’s work on the Mediterranean, Goody (2010: 111–112) argued that capitalism was not the invention of one country or one region, but an aspect of merchant economies that emerged in the Bronze Age. Mediterranean historian David Abulafia (2019: xx) takes this strain of thought further, arguing that the history of long-distance travel across the seas and the ocean is the history of people willing to take risks, including the reinvestment of their resources in search of

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2 Despite the fact that Europe’s geopolitical centrality declined with the emergence of maritime seafaring across the Atlantic, the Mediterranean remained a zone of connection between European powers and their North African colonies and dominions until the independence of Algeria in 1962. In the present time, the Mediterranean is no longer a zone of connection in the Braudelian sense; rather, it has become a militarised border zone separating Africa and the Middle East from Europe. The issue of the Mediterranean Sea emerging as a “political border”, however, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

profit and wealth. Using present-day concepts, he suggests that we could probably call them early capitalists. Abulafi (2019: xxi) continues, becoming visible at the very start of the Indian Ocean trade, in the cities of Bronze Age Mesopotamia, and throughout the following centuries. We are thus dealing not with the 'European miracle', but rather with interacting economies, cultures and systems of knowledge that mutually influenced each other for thousands of years (Goody 2010: 112). In this vein, the world's oldest transoceanic long-distance trade—which created the Indian Ocean World—was tied not to empires or states, but to old diasporas that straddle regions and continents (Hofmeyr 2010: 722). Much of the travel was motivated by religious communities that, for a variety of reasons, often established overseas diasporas. Over time, these diasporas interacted with empires, expanding their diasporic networks—Jewish, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim—thereby directly feeding into forms of indigenous capitalism that produced the long-term trajectories leading to today's Asian economic success (Hofmeyr 2010: 722). From a *longue durée* perspective, when the Europeans intruded on the scene of the old inter-Asian trading and banking system of the Indian Ocean, they encountered organised groups of Chinese, Indian and Jewish bankers who maintained long-distance credit networks connecting several countries (Ray 1995: 553).

Historian Rajat Kanta Ray brilliantly shows that the encounter between the European transnational systems of credit and trade and those of the Indian Ocean world was much more complex than the unilateral expansion of the Western "capitalist world economy" that is presented in standard historical accounts. According to Ray (1995: 552–553), "[t]he transition from fixed book credits and unregistered loans to the world of mobile credits operating through negotiable instruments had taken place in Asia long before the arrival of the Europeans". While it is true that modern Asian enterprises are the product of quick adaptation to the new realities of international trade introduced by Europeans, their current success remains deeply rooted in old "Asian maritime and monetary activities going back to a dim past" (Ray 1995: 553). The "European miracle", with its supposed progression from antiquity via feudalism to bourgeois capitalism (Goody 2010: 112), thus dissolves in the old Indian Ocean trade routes and diasporic networks that once connected the Indus civilisation to

Mesopotamia and East Africa and Yemen to Malaysia, just to mention a few examples. Sumerians, Harrapans, Hadrami Yemenis, Gujaratis, Tamils, Buginese, Cham, Malays, Jews, Armenians and Muslims—they all participated for millennia in trade beyond the state. Abulafia (2019: xx) is right when he says that we cannot understand the “European presence around the shores of the oceans” in the fifteenth century without “taking into account the less well-documented activities of non-European merchants and sailors, some of whom were indigenous to the lands in which they lived, others of whom formed part of widespread diasporas”. Hann goes even further, asserting that even the narrative of fifteenth-century mercantile capitalism is already so thoroughly situated within the Europeanist paradigm that it would be misleading to take it as a starting point in our understanding of the social relations of the capitalist mode of production, which should be traced back to the urban revolution of Bronze Age Eurasia (Hann 2018b: 27; but cf. Moore 2015; 2016). As Engseung Ho reminds us, the Europeans—Portuguese, Dutch and English—“were strange new traders who brought their states with them” and “created militarised trading-post empires in the Indian Ocean, following Venetian and Genoese precedents in the Mediterranean” (Ho 2006: xxi). Indeed, the age of European supremacy and the ideas Europeans brought to new places initiated a tectonic shift in how the world was imagined, mapped and governed, but it was still a world characterised by the movements of many different tectonic plates.

## Transoceania: From Terrestrial Divides to the Singularity and Connectedness of the Ocean

When the anthropologist-turned-journalist Ian Urbina interviewed Vietnamese fishermen who fished without legal permission in other countries’ waters, they turned out to be fairly “ocean literate persons”, able to explain that “there aren’t many oceans; there’s just one” (Urbina 2019: 408). Indeed, as noted earlier in the chapter, according to the *Ocean Literacy Guide* there is only one ocean, which covers approximately seventy percent of Earth’s surface.<sup>3</sup> However, the fishermen’s point regarding

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3 See ‘Ocean Literacy: The Essential Principles and Fundamental Concepts of Ocean Sciences for Learners of All Ages’, Version 2, March 2013, <http://www.coexploration.org/oceanliteracy/documents/OceanLitChart.pdf>.

the singularity of the ocean was not as much about the *functioning* of the ocean as it was about the *connectedness* of the ocean, which has for centuries supported navigation and trade. Environmental historian John Gillis (2018: 109) reminds us that, prior to the nineteenth century, world maps and our geographical vocabulary had focused on a series of distinct points rather than on lines. Harbours, estuaries, headlands, peninsulas and islands were used for navigation purposes and were of great strategic importance to the rise and fall of maritime empires. From the nineteenth century onward, however, we can observe a reverse trend, with lines gaining new importance while the significance of old geographical points along the shore faded. In the nineteenth century, the trading post empires evolved into terrestrial colonial states, with the coast defining one or more of their most significant boundaries (Gillis 2018: 110). Once the islands and littoral were projected as discrete lines on the cartographic grid, the coast and its diverse landforms became the property of the state and, subsequently, of private owners (Gillis 2018: 109–112).

The reconfiguration of the coast from a permeable and fluid zone of contact to a fixed national boundary facilitated the emergence of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) regime, promulgated from 1982 onwards, which gives states sovereign rights to the exploration of all resources within 200 nautical miles of their coastal shores. As the new regime became widely accepted and globalised, most countries with significant coastlines enclosed or sought to enclose and nationalise their ocean spaces within the maritime borders of the new EEZs. In other words, EEZs allow coastal countries to extend their territorial sovereignty and, in some cases, to claim as their exclusive state property high seas or open sea areas that until the late twentieth century had been zones of connection and resource commons. In the post-Brexit naval stand-off around the Channel Islands, the UK's policy of 'taking back control' of the national waters and France's claims on the basis of 'long-standing traditional fishing grounds' lay bare how historically modern the invention of maritime sovereignty is, incompatible with traditional fishing rights in what until the passage of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982 had been regarded as 'the high seas'. The territorial dispute between China and a number of ASEAN countries and Taiwan over sovereignty in the South China Sea is another case in point where the high seas and remote reefs that

have historically been used by ethnically diverse seafarers are imagined by claimant states as their national territory (Roszko 2015). Today, the long-standing connectivity and interactions in the sea create a sort of “territorial anxiety predicated on a historically recent understanding of territoriality as a constituent of state-spatial thinking represented and produced through cartographic technologies” (Roszko 2017: 22; see also Elden 2009; 2013). This could happen because the early twentieth century’s concept of homogeneous, bounded space in the form of the nation-state replaced non-Western imperial understandings of unbounded space and territory (Callahan 2009: 141, 146).

Consequently, the old transoceanic circulations had to be appropriated and domesticated by the projection of historically modern concepts such as sovereignty, EEZs and Grotius’s idea of *mare liberum* (‘freedom of the seas’). Lewis and Wigen (1997: 198) remind us in their excellent analysis that neither continents nor world regions nor modern territorial concepts are timeless entities; they are contingent outcomes of historical processes. They are the result of Western geographical imaginaries that became hegemonic through analytical frameworks such as the “Black Atlantic” (Gilroy 1993) and “North Atlantic universals” (Trouillot 2002). As the categories of vernacular, European, land-based imaginaries were universalised, the resulting universals were, in turn, re-vernacularised, thereby erasing local histories.

## An Emergent Thalassography of Transoceanic Connections

Thus far in this chapter I have sought to foreground the sea-borne connectivity and history *on* the ocean and seas, not just *of* the ocean (see Pearson 2003: 9). Proposing the concept of Transoecania, I have argued that transoceanic connections can help us challenge what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2002: 220) labelled “particulars” or “chunks of human history” that have been turned into historical standards, not to describe the world, but to offer certain normative visions of it. These standards can blind us to other vernacular geographies and histories. The question then arises: How can anthropologists retrieve mobile sea-borne and sea-oriented livelihoods and histories from the hegemonic and universalised visions of the world that we have access to? The



answer, Hann (2017: 227) tells us, is by embracing “the particularism of the ethnographer”. Obviously, mobile maritime actors such as fishers, slaves, seafarers, traders and pirates are not easily pinned down within the static geographical and political frames of continents, empires and nation-states. Yet a larger conception of interconnected oceanic worlds helps us to situate the spatial context within which these various forms of floating labour intersect, coexist, interact, collaborate, compete and influence each other across temporal scales (see Gilroy 1993; Hoskins and Nguyen 2014).

An ethnographic approach—one that traces the recent past through the accounts of people recorded in the present—could help connect the dots between spatially distant places and temporally disparate events, practices and people (Roszko 2020: 22–23). Rather than following them on the sea (which can be quite difficult to accomplish), anthropologists can try to grasp the constellations of networks, practices and encounters that are taking place at the edges of water bodies and on the land at specific on-shore nodal points (see Ho 2006; Roszko 2017; Schnepel 2019). In this sense, the empirical and analytical fields are mobile, multi-sited, relational, ongoing and, at the same time, oriented towards the historically deep connections and patterns that underpin people’s present-day practices. It appears that the Indian Ocean has attracted the most attention among historians as a “transnational and oceanic” unit of analysis and method (Hofmayer 2012), as a zone of “transregional connections” (Ho 2004), or as “connectivity in motion” (Schnepel and Alpers 2019). This trend has been followed by social scientists, who have adopted a new paradigm of ‘transpacific connections’ that forge diasporas (“displaced people”) and transnationalism (“movement of people and capital across national borders”) across the Pacific (Hoskins and Nguyen 2014; see also Roszko 2021a). In my own work on the South China Sea, I have developed a specific form of what I call an *emergent thalassography of transoceanic connections*, in reference to connections that are discontinuous and unstable, but sometimes coalesce around a single, localised ethnographic space that is, at the same time, rarely fixed in one place.

Expanding Peter Miller’s (2013: 16) definition of thalassography as “sea-based history-writing that focuses on connectivity, networks and individuals” (see also Vink 2007; Steinberg 2013; 2014), I

understand thalassography as the historically informed, vernacular-based geography-*cum*-methodology for researching mobile maritime actors' practices in transoceanic spaces. Based on a combination of historical, ethnographic and documentary methods, thalassography as the historical and vernacular geography of the sea helps to identify sea-oriented people's experience-based, vernacular knowledge of diverse aspects of the ocean. For the floating labour—seafarers, fishers, poachers, smugglers, militia and pirates—the sea is not just a wide surface, but an ever-changing seascape made up of sea features, sites and histories; memories of fortunes, disasters and daily survival; the transgression of bodily, physical and geographical limits; and state regulations and borders. The comparative analysis of life histories, oral traditions, enduring customs, logbooks, maps, graphic representations of territory, and technological changes in maritime and marine practices can help us uncover the ways in which these various labourers interact with ocean spaces, illuminating larger processes that would otherwise remain obscure (see Feldman 2011; see also Hofmeyer 2012; Roszko 2021b; Vink 2007; Steinberg 2014). However, without engaging in deep history and archaeology and without contextualising our ethnographic data, this thalassography methodology still only amounts to historically “shallow temporalities”, to use Hann's term (2017: 226). I share his conviction that we should not limit ourselves to “ethnographies in the neoliberal present” (Hann 2016: 7) and that anthropology and archaeology together can provide us with a more complete story about humankind. In my own research, I have found it particularly fruitful to collaborate with archaeologists and historians to trace the various connections at different temporal and spatial scales in order to develop an analytical model of what Hann (2017a: 227) called “long-term patterns of socio-cultural resilience and transformation” of (in my case) coastal communities.

Over the years, bridging different historical periods, countries and regions, I have developed insights into fishers as mobile maritime actors who capitalise on long-standing historical patterns of interconnected marine and maritime mobilities in pursuit of livelihoods (see Roszko 2021b). For example, my ethnographic research and collaboration with archaeologists and historians on a number of islands in the South China Sea uncovered ancient Cham wells as vital sources of freshwater close to the shore. In the past, these wells enabled seafaring, trade and the

development of fisheries, making the islands on which the wells were located part of an important network of freshwater sources not only for Cham, but also for Malay, Arab, Persian and other sailors throughout the first two millennia CE. The maritime and marine knowledge of the seascape and the skills accumulated by fishers-cum-seafarers during their past ventures have not vanished; they have been passed down through generations and applied to new ventures, whether it is the smuggling of goods or people, poaching or piracy (Roszko 2021b). With the rise of nation-states, the maritime routes expanded and changed and the fluid ethnic identities hardened, but the deeper structures of “local cosmopolitanism” (Ho 2006) underlying “sea work” remain stubbornly persistent down through the generations, if not centuries. Engaging archaeology along with ethnography in recording subaltern transoceanic histories offers an approach that shifts our focus away from unitary models such as national histories and area studies, as well as from colonial histories of expansion, towards more fluid transoceanic connections that span various ocean-based worlds and build on long-standing patterns of movement among peoples who have always been mobile.

## Conclusion

Let me briefly return to the opening vignette and the Chinese soapstone carving. My father and grandparents had no idea that the carving was Chinese; all they knew was that it came from the ‘East’. It is possible that earlier generations of my paternal grandmother’s family were more aware of the object’s origins, but this knowledge was lost over time. This chapter is an attempt to recover forgotten, or perhaps more precisely, neglected exchanges and interactions that go far beyond the Eurasian continent. They might start on land and extend far into the ocean worlds, or *vice versa*. By taking Chris Hann’s *longue durée* approach, I have shown that the Indian Ocean is the site of some of the oldest trade routes and is one of the earliest connective seas in history in terms of how it was used and navigated by humans. Passage over its waters dates back at least five thousand years, to the time when trade in the Red Sea began. Michael Pearson says that “[b]y comparison, the Atlantic is 1,000 years old, if one takes account of the Viking voyages, while the whole Atlantic

is just over 500 years old. The Pacific has seen long-distance voyaging for at most 2,000 years, though nowhere near the density of communication as that over the Indian Ocean" (Pearson 2003: 3). Although the Pacific is the largest of the ocean basins, European geographers claim that it had no name until Europeans baptised it the *Mare Pacificum* ('the Peaceful Sea'). But to the Polynesian seafarers who arrived long before Europeans, "the Pacific's awesome vastness was minimised somewhat by its ten thousand islands, many grouped into archipelagos, which felt to their inhabitants something like watery mainlands, connected rather than separated by water" (Gillis 2012: 45). In the Polynesian navigators' view, the Pacific was the sea of connected islands that represented their common heritage generated by transoceanic voyages, and not a series of isolated islands in the distant ocean (Hau'ofa 2008). Lewis and Wigen (1997: 199) argue that only a sea-centred perspective can reveal these complex connections and exchanges, which come in sometimes unexpected configurations that differ from those that the static constructs of continents might imply.

If Eurasia brings to the fore "unity-in-civilizational-diversity of the Old World" and shatters the myth of Europe as the superior continent (Hann 2016: 1), the analytical construct of Transoecania connects the various ocean and sea worlds, offering a deterritorialised view of competing universalisms beyond the Eurasian supercontinent. Such universalism is not based on European hegemonic visions of the world, but on everyday encounters and interactions through seafaring, fisheries, trade, piracy and slavery (Hofmeyr 2010; 2012; DeLoughrey 2007). It is the ocean rather than the land that makes visible other, vernacular geographies and histories that allow for transregional, comparative and subaltern approaches (Burton et al. 2013). Transoecania is thus a spatio-temporal construct, encompassing both non-Eurasian and Eurasian navigators and mutually constituted by vernacular geographies of continents and ocean worlds. It is not defined by the Bronze Revolution or by the age of European dominance, but by the vernacular histories and practices of mobile peoples. Transoecania's subaltern seafaring histories are grounded not in solid archaeological remnants preserved on the continents; rather, they flow and drift on the scraps and fragments of extant genetic, botanical, linguistic and ethnographic evidence. Transoecania emerges from the discontinuous and wavering landforms in the great singular ocean, rising in the guise

of what Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1996) poetically calls “the repeating island”—of languages, ethnicities and traditions—that gives shape to complex, non-linear and fragmented transoceanic genealogies and connectivities. These transoceanic connectivities and genealogies do not exclude continents; to the contrary, they connect continents but—turning European hegemony on its head—tie them more closely to the rhythms of the sea tides and the monsoons. In the end, the connectivities afforded by the geographic constructs of Eurasia and Transoceania have historically intersected and still, to this day, mutually depend on one another.

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