Smuggling and states along a Southeast Asian frontier

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The development of a border between the British and Dutch colonial regimes in Southeast Asia was intimately linked with smuggling across their frontier. While advances in technology and organisation enhanced European abilities to create and maintain borders during the period 1865-1915, western, and particularly Dutch fears of the ‘wild space’ of frontier areas never really waned over the course of this period.

Smuggling in its many manifestations (of drugs, arms, people, and currency, for example) had much to do with this paradoxical dynamic. Though these states waged fairly successful wars against certain ‘secret trades’ (such as counterfeited currency), other goods such as narcotics were never controlled during these 50 years. Other contraband commodities including human beings, in the form of prostitutes, coolies, and slaves, metamorphosed over time and more or less went underground. The Anglo-Dutch border, created and strengthened by modernising colonial states, was rife with smuggling, stated another way, boundary-production and boundary-transgression were two sides of the same coin.

Evidence in fragments

The story of smuggling across the sensitive and evolving Anglo-Dutch border in Southeast Asia is complex, and available information is fragmentary at best. Grand economic and political narratives do not tell the full story. To get an idea of how borders and smuggling actually interacted on the ground, we need to look at individual people and specific places: testimonials of Chinese woodcutters who were trafficked to coastal Sumatra; witness statements of men whose ships were pirated off the shore of Acheh; data on morphine seizures in Penang in 1906; the waters around the island of Bangka, which reveal evolving imperial hydrographical abilities at the turn of the century. While the physical locus of smuggling along the Anglo/Dutch boundary was local, radials of this commerce penetrated far away places – Java and Timor, and even China, Arabia and Japan. The Anglo-Dutch frontier in colonial Southeast Asia was a swirling maelstrom of people, landscapes and connections that bound the region into a new grid, and maintained links outside of it at the same time.

The entirety of this illicit commerce might be called ‘undertrading’, the passage of goods underneath – or at the legal and geographic interstices of – the majority of items traded in the area. Undertrading had a phased existence, with certain products and ports passing in and out of the ‘undertrade’ category. Items in these waters were not designated as contraband simply on ontological grounds. Rather, historical moments dictated to colonial governments whether it was in their interest to designate products as illegal. Thus guns, unfarmed opium and human beings (such as prostitutes and slaves) were often classified as contraband; other commodities, including pepper, porcelain, and even bulk shipments of rice, were only sometimes listed so. Specific ports could likewise be declared open to trade or strictly off-limits. Such decisions encouraged a brisk flow of officially ‘licit’ goods – either in newly illegal items or to newly illegal places.

Spaces of dissent

Some spaces were judged to be better than others for smuggling, giving rise to a geography of contrabanding. Historically, undertrading has flourished in borderlands and peripheries; at natural choke points, such as mountain passes and narrow waterways; and in urban confusion, where the state has difficulty seeing through the frenzy of activity. Singapore – situated along the narrow waterway of the Straits and being a maritime border town – was a perfect focal point for smuggling. The city was also a crucial haven for smugglers because it was strategically linked with smuggling across the region. The stakes for trading or smuggling successfully were high, ensuring the flow of goods could mean the difference between maintaining one’s power or losing it to rivals. Many could participate as the overhead needed for smuggling was often very low – a boat, some provisions, and local knowledge of tides, sandbars, and winds. With the imposition of powerful European states in the late 19th century, many local people did indeed try to make money in this way.

Such forms of state-designated criminality and resistance against ruling regimes have taken on many guises in human history. If James Scott is right in that the peasantry had everyday ways to resist state and elite exactions, how much more thus was the case for merchants and long-distance traders? Possessing capital and distant contacts which peasants lacked – and a mobility that was part and parcel of their occupation – merchants (and the corrupt officials who were very often their allies) found many ways to resist the tightening stric- tures of government, especially by smuggling. Some traders were merely continuing age-old commodity lines that now were designated as contrabanding by governments. Others saw the new imposition of borders and rigidified controls as an opportunity to make money. Many passed from being colonial computerst outlaws, though some of the smartest seem to have been able to occupy both niches at once.

For further reading

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