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South China Sea Early Globalization: A Systemic View from the Isthmus of Kra

This chapter examines early globalization in the South China Sea from 500 BC to AD 500, focusing on the interconnected maritime networks that linked South and Southeast Asia. Focusing on the Isthmus of Kra as a key crossroads, the study reveals a dynamic system of trade, cultural exchange and technological transfer that challenges traditional interpretations of “Indianization.” Archaeological evidence from port-settlements such as Khao Sam Kaeo and Khao Sek reveal complex political and economic structures characterized by cosmopolitan populations, specialized industries, and transpeninsular trade routes. These settlements produced culturally hybrid artifacts, such as ornaments and ceramics, that blend South and Southeast Asian styles. This evidence points to a “Late Prehistoric South China Sea style,” a pan-regional material culture that underscores the deep interconnectedness of the region. The chapter proposes a model of early globalization that eschews hierarchical framings such as Immanuel Wallerstein’s core-periphery model. Instead, a decentralized, systemic perspective is adopted that highlights the role of often overlooked small-scale mobile groups, including artisans, maritime nomads, traders and maritime communities. These actors acted as intermediaries, facilitating exchanges and shaping cultural identities across interconnected networks. This systemic approach defines globalization as a dynamic, multidirectional process driven by diverse participants and fluid alliances rather than elite or centralized powers. It portrays the South China Sea as a vibrant hub where local and global forces intersect, creating a mosaic of interconnected yet distinct cultural and economic practices. This systemic view enriches our understanding of the South China Sea’s role as a center of early globalization and the intricate interplay of local and global forces that shaped its history.

Keywords: *globalization; connectivity; hybridization; decentralization; maritime network; Isthmus of Kra; small-scale groups; mobile groups; cosmopolitanism; trading polities.*