

Most histories of Asia are about nation/states, such as China, India, Indonesia, Afghanistan, or Sri Lanka. Nation/states are, indeed, a suitable unit of analysis for the 20th century, perhaps even for the 19th century, when nationalists imagined their respective nations. But what about earlier eras when empires sprawled across today's national boundaries then collapsed into successor states? How are historians to capture a time without passports, with porous borders, and family networks that crossed continents?

Social networking in pre-modern Asian History

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The typical solution to this dilemma – and one can find it any textbook on China or India – is to select a large kingdom in the past whose boundaries closely fit the boundaries of the current nation/state. This kingdom becomes the cornerstone of a national history. In India, for example, the 'chosen' kingdom was the Guptas, who ruled large parts of present-day India (320 – 550 CE). After the Guptas, the history of India is reduced to a few iconic events that 'explain' the present situation of the nation/state. This process produces spectacular elisions. Untouchables, women and tribals disappear as does the history of South India. We lose the story of the 95% of the population who lived in villages and much of the millennium between 500 and 1500. The connections – intellectual, religious, military, or trade – that spread thousands of miles beyond India's borders are barely mentioned.

The exciting new studies on the history of Asia have looked beyond national boundaries and include a now-extensive literature on the Silk Road and its water-borne counterpart in Southeast Asia. Tansen Sen, for example, has explored the broad Buddhist oekumene (600 – 900 CE) that tied together China, Central Asia, India, and Southeast Asia. The Indian Ocean as a region has also received attention, such as older work by K N Chaudari, Mike Pearson, and Abu Lughod, and, more recently, the research of Hima Ray, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Richard Eaton. From the proponents of world history, there have been several attempts to link all of Asia, Africa and Europe as a single unit, termed Afro-Eurasia, such as Victor Lieberman's *Strange Parallels* and Philippe Beaujard's article in *Journal of World History* (2005).

All of these supra-national studies of Asian history embrace networks, whether explicitly or implicitly. Those studying trade must follow commodities from source to consumer and consider the chain of traders that supplied the demand. Diplomatic history must follow ambassadors to their destinations and examine common customs that made diplomacy possible. Intellectual history must follow a thinker's ideas to the people he influenced.

Mapping connections

There is a well-developed body of theory, known as social network analysis, that can focus this attention to connections across Asia. At its most general social network analysis looks at how relationships, especially social pressures, around a person, group, or organisation affect beliefs or behaviours. The earliest research in the field asked people in a small town who they knew and mapped the connections. The analysis is of properties of relations between, people, rather than the characteristics of individuals. Hypotheses are tested on this second order data, that is, patterns extracted from maps of connections.

Researchers have developed a variety of statistical analyses to locate and describe distinctive and interesting features of a social network. Three measures seem standard for any network analysis.

- 1) **'Centrality'**. A comparison of how many connections each of the people in the network has. Networks range from quite egalitarian (many people connected to many others) through highly centralised (most communication through just a couple of people) to single-person dominated.
- 2) **'Betweenness'**. The degree that an individual forms connections between otherwise unconnected subgroups in the net. Generally, high 'betweenness' means that a person has great influence over flows across the network.
- 3) **'Closeness'**. The degree to which a person in the net can communicate with others without having to go through another person. A person with high 'closeness' generally has a better-than-average overall view of what is happening in the whole of the network.

Let me suggest some of the attractive features of network analysis for Asian history. It focuses attention away from nation/states and to connections and interchange. The unit of analysis is the actual extent of the network and geographically scales up or down, reflecting the size of the network under consideration. It, thus, avoids 'natural' regions, instead analysing where and when networks crossed regions and apparent boundaries. With its focus on networks rather than regions, it sidesteps the discussion whether change was 'external' or 'internal'. It focuses attention away from 'cores' and 'peripheries'. It accepts that many different things – commodities, information, marriage partners, slaves, personal gifts – moved along the same network. It avoids European 'exceptionalism' by accepting that some networks included Europe and others did not. In contrast to analysis of 'circulation', it accepts that actual networks overlapped, changed, and decayed. Perhaps most importantly, it puts real people back into Asian history, rather than only rises and falls, trends, movements, and developments.

Ibn Battuta (travelled 1325 – 1356 CE), for example, is routinely treated as simply the furthest-travelled man of the Middle Ages. A social network perspective cues us to his main activity during his travels, garnering introductions and nurturing connections that would help him on the way. Even as a young man on the Hajj, Ibn Battuta met men from all over the Muslim world. He met one Mansard bin Shaik of Medina who he encountered twice subsequently, once in Syria and once in Bukhara. Another fellow pilgrim was named ali bin Hujr al-Umawi. He came from Granada in Spain and later Ibn Battuta offered him patronage in Delhi.¹

Most pilgrims returned to their lives after the week of holy activities at Mecca. Ibn

Battuta, however, stayed, studied and made contacts. During his year in Mecca Ibn Battuta met the man who served as senior ambassador from the Sultan of Delhi and regularly travelled between India and Mecca with donations from the Indian court. He also came across a fellow jurist who was a friend of his father's from his hometown of Tauja, Morocco. These men were only a sample of tens of thousands who travelled far and found employment as teachers, judges, clerics, administrators and soldiers.

Social network analysis alerts us that by the 12th century there existed – for the first time – a world largely without borders for educated men. For these men there was a sense of home and familiarity from Spain to the port cities of China. Their skills in law and religious teaching were equally applicable and equally desired across the whole Muslim world. Many cities attracted these learned travellers. Ibn Battuta found that the "controller of the judicial administration" at Medina was from Tunis; his family was still well connected there. Scholars at Medina included men from Fez, Cairo, and Granada. Among the notable scholars of Damascus was one from Seville (Spain) and another from Marrakech (Morocco). At Mashed, in southern Iraq, the religious and political head of the city had a brother who lived and worked in Spain and Gibraltar. Near Shiraz, in Persia, Ibn Battuta visited the hostel of Shaikh Abu lasq, which received money from patrons in the Middle East, coastal India, and China.

Using social network analysis more formally, with mapping and mathematical tests, requires fairly dense communication data. Such data is, of course, available for the modern period of Asian history in the form of letters, conference records, memoirs, and even court cases. Surprisingly, sufficiently dense communication data is also occasionally available for earlier periods. I have come across two such caches. One is the Marathi records of the 18th century in Western India. All letters to and from the political head of the kingdom were recorded and summarised. Mapping this data would reveal many unknown features of the kingdom – how centralised it was, how often information arrived from officials in the countryside, how frequent were appeals, how much contact was there between the court and local militarised elites.

Another set of data dense enough to do formal network analysis are the documents of the Cairo Geniza, generated by a group of Jewish spice traders based in Aden and Mangalore (on the Southwest coast of India) in the first half of the 12th century. Network analysis has alerted me to the crucial role of trust in the trading transactions. The documents refer to an Ashabuna and by that they mean a long-standing group of business partners with a high degree of trust. In most transactions, simple instructions left the mechanics and the terms up to the trusted receiver:

"I am asking you now, relying on your favours, when this shipment, God willing, safely arrives, to kindly take delivery of one-half of the aforementioned bales and sell them for me for whatever God will apportion and grant.

After the price is agreed upon, turn everything into gold and silver – nothing else – and distribute it among various merchants, coreligionists, or others, if they are known as reliable, and send it on".²

Networks of trust

Trust was built by living up to obligations. There was an assumed mutuality between partners, serving each other. There was a shared sense of a 'reasonable amount' of labour to spend in a partner's transaction. The letters are full of mild complaints about how much time and effort a partner's business took. Or exhortations to a partner to expend full effort to find a good market because, as the writer says, "that's the kind of man you are". Anyone who has done business in Asia knows these networks are as important now as they were then. Many Asian countries have relatively weak contract enforcement and regulatory structures. In this business climate, the real guarantee of quality product and timely delivery is personal networks of trust.

Here, then, is a preliminary social network map of one of the business networks that traded spices from the Malabar Coast of India to Aden and Cairo in the 12th century. It is based on approximately half of the relevant documents. Note the central position of Madmun, a role borne out by the substance of the letters:



Overall, network analysis strongly suggests that the network was the operational unit of analysis for understanding the Indian Spice Trade – not a geographic unit such as the Indian Ocean trade or a trade confined to India.

Finally, I want to emphasise that social network analysis, in either its 'soft' form or the more mathematical form, is not the be all and the end all. It has obvious limitations. Social network analysis does not handle change well unless one can do repeated iterations of the net over time.

The position of a person at the centre of the net can give a false impression of the person's centrality. One has to do statistical analysis to get the actual centrality.

Social network analysis is a useful tool for the study of Asian history, generating viewpoints, questions and insights available no other way. Because of its limitations, it needs to be done in conjunction with more traditional institutional analysis, geographic analysis, and the instincts about change and process that come from training as an historian.

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