



Extended Abstract

Cultures as information aggregators: an example from South-East Asia (The formation of shared navigational knowledge, 1500-1650)

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Introduction

Inter-cultural communication can be a topic worthy for examination for several reasons. It is not rare that the encounter of different cultures result in information-related “improvements”. Such improvements may have many faces (e.g. technological transfer or adoption of new customs). This, as a historical phenomenon often can be traced, for instance, near the border regions of empires, around diasporas, or along trade routes. The European expansion of the early modern era gave an especially important boost to such encounters. This chain of events created connected cultures that not at all or hardly had any communication with each other up to that time.

Methods

In my presentation I would like to take a look on the development of navigational knowledge at the early stage of the European expansion. Though I mostly focus on a specific region (namely, on Asia) and on one set of information within the mentioned broader picture, this examination can be interesting

from several aspects. These were the decades when the major European powers of the age (in this context they are: Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, and England) discovered this region for themselves. In this case the actors involved in the communication were not completely unknown to each other (like in the case of America), but they were far from being well-known as well. On the other hand, the mentioned European nations met with several cultures that had advanced and significantly different navigational knowledge in these decades. This created a favourable atmosphere for inter-cultural communication. Though there were several points where Asia and Europe contacted each other, before the end of 15th century no European ships reached Asian waters. This means that the intercultural transfer of information related with navigation started in this era. Finally, European navigational knowledge (the intended and declared focus of this presentation) transformed significantly in this time. This transformation was twofold. It had internal roots, too, but the mentioned encounters with other navigating cultures often resulted in mutual changes as well.

I would like to touch upon different aspects of navigational knowledge in the given context. First of all, I will go into some details of the internal changes of the “national” (i.e. Portuguese, Dutch etc.) segments of the navigational knowledge. From this aspect several transformations can be traced in the mentioned decades, which were important for creating widespread practices. The most important problems worthy for a highlight probably are the movement from experience-based practices to “scientific” ones, or the changing emphasis of written and unwritten knowledge.

The other primary focus will be the movement of navigational knowledge between the mentioned European actors. This leads towards the topic mentioned in the title of the presentation: the formation of *a* set of navigational knowledge – in this case a European set of knowledge. Though the individual national practices probably differed significantly, so one cannot speak of a strictly “European” knowledge, I try to go into the details of some events of information transfer between the mentioned European powers.

In the next point I will leave Europe, and focus on another stage. I still will focus on the European powers, but now I try to show how they acted when they had to find their ways in a *terra incognita*. From this aspect the individual European powers differed very much, as they did not reach the region at the same time or from the same direction. The Portuguese were the first, so they could not use former European experience. The Spanish acted mostly in the south-eastern part of Asia. The Dutch and the English arrived almost a century later than the Portuguese. In this part, I try to examine how the mentioned powers acted when they first faced a significant lack of knowledge on their destinations. The Portuguese example probably leads us towards the final part of the presentation – the transfer of

knowledge between Asian and European cultures. The Dutch and English example points backwards: their tapping of Portuguese knowledge was mostly an information-transfer between Europeans.

The exact topic mentioned in the title will be touched at the final parts of the presentation. I will focus on the cross-cultural changes between European actors and Southeast Asian navigators. On the Asian side not states were the primary parties involved in this transfer, as states themselves (at least the two biggest, Japan and China) seem to have been less interested in this communication. Instead, other actors should be mentioned, for instance merchant houses of individual (sometimes freelance) navigators. I will emphasize the two-way communication between Asian and European parties, and will enumerate some instances that can be comprehended as products of both cultures, that is, as imprints of a shared, common navigational knowledge.

Conclusions

After checking the mentioned individual stages, significant changes of navigational knowledge can be mentioned. First of all, we can find a tendency of “merging” in Europe: the different national sets of navigational knowledge tended to influence each other, actors borrowed different practices from each other. Another important tendency is the movement from experience and unwritten knowledge towards scientific and written forms. Finally, we can find a “merging” process, similar to that of the one mentioned in Europe—this time in Asia. We can find several clues that the manifold contacts between Asian and European experts, methods, technical materials etc. tended to create another “cosmopolitan” set of navigational knowledge. However, this time the change did not include only European communities, but Asian ones, too.

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