

Diffusion of Crops and Pathogens

Vietnam

Occupying the coastal regions east of the mountainous spine of mainland Southeast Asia, Vietnam's economic and political life centered on two fertile river valleys, the Red River in the north and the Mekong° in the south. Agriculture was also possible in many smaller coastal areas where streams from the mountains—torrents during the monsoon season—flowed down to the sea. The rice-based agriculture of Vietnam made the region well suited for integration with southern China. As in southern China, the wet climate and hilly terrain of Vietnam demanded expertise in irrigation.

In Tang and Song times the elites of “Annam°”—as the Chinese called early Vietnam—adopted Confucian bureaucratic training, Mahayana Buddhism, and other aspects of Chinese culture. Annamese elites continued to rule in the Tang style after that dynasty's fall. Annam assumed the name Dai Viet° in 936 and maintained good relations with Song China as an independent country.

Champa, located largely in what is now southern Vietnam, rivaled the Dai Viet state. The cultures of India and Malaya strongly influenced Champa through

the networks of trade and communication that encompassed the Indian Ocean. During the Tang period Champa had hostile relations with Dai Viet, but both kingdoms cooperated with the less threatening Song, the former as a voluntary tributary state. Among the tribute gifts brought to the Song court by Champa emissaries was **Champa rice** (originally from India). Chinese farmers soon made use of this fast-maturing variety to improve their yields of the essential crop.

Vietnam shared the Confucian interest in hierarchy that was also evident in Korea and Japan, but attitudes toward women, like those in the other two countries, differed from the Chinese model. None of the societies adopted the Chinese practice of footbinding. In Korea strong family alliances that functioned like political and economic organizations allowed women a role in negotiating and disposing of property. Before the adoption of Confucianism, Annamese women had enjoyed higher status than women in China, perhaps because both women and men participated in wet-rice cultivation.

Overland Trade and the Plague

Commercial integration under Mongol rule strongly affected both the eastern and western wings of the empire. Like their aristocratic predecessors in Inner Asia, Mongol nobles had the exclusive right to wear silk, almost all of which came from China. Trade under Mongol dominion brought new styles and huge quantities of silk westward, not just for clothing but also for wall hangings and furnishings. Abundant silk fed the luxury trade in the Middle East and Europe. Artistic motifs from Japan and Tibet reached as far as England and Morocco. Porcelain was another eastern luxury product that became important in trade and strongly influenced later cultural tastes in the Islamic world.

Traders from all over Eurasia enjoyed the benefits of Mongol control. Merchants encountered ambassadors, scholars, and missionaries over the long routes to the Mongol courts. Some of the resulting travel literature, like the account of the Venetian Marco Polo° (1254–1324), freely mixed the fantastic with the factual. Stories of fantastic wealth stimulated a European ambition to find easier routes to Asia.

Exchange also held great dangers. In southwestern China **bubonic plague** had festered in Yunnan province since the early Tang period. In the mid-thirteenth century Mongol troops established a garrison in Yunnan whose military and supply traffic provided the means for flea-infested rats to carry the plague into central China, northwestern China, and Central Asia. Marmots and other desert rodents along the routes became infected and passed the disease to dogs and people. The caravan traffic infected the oasis towns. The plague incapacitated the Mongol army during their assault on the city of Kaffa° in Crimea° in 1346. They withdrew, but the plague remained. From Kaffa rats infected by fleas reached Europe and Egypt by ship (see Chapter 14).

Typhus, influenza, and smallpox traveled with the plague. The combination of these and other diseases created what is often called the “great pandemic” of 1347–1352 and spread devastation far in excess of what the Mongols inflicted in war. Peace and trade, not conquest, gave rise to the great pandemic.

1. What were the biological effects of post-classical trade?

2. What new foods, crops, and agricultural practices diffused in the post-classical era?

3. What diseases and pathogens also spread via post-classical trade networks?