

The Mechanisms of Mutual Support between Merchants and Monastic Communities along the Maritime Silk Road before the Ninth Century

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Abstract

This article analyzes the mechanism of mutual support between merchants and monastics along the pre-ninth-century Indian Ocean maritime routes as a structured operational system, rather than a set of incidental supportive relationships. Addressing a gap in scholarship that has traditionally treated trade and religion as separate domains, it examines the material and social conditions that enabled monastic mobility across maritime space, while also explaining the mediating role of merchants in this process.

Building on the “merit – merchant – monastic community” framework, the study demonstrates that the interaction between material capital, symbolic capital, and institutional capital constitutes an integrated exchange mechanism, in which *dāna*, mobility, and the accumulation of merit operate within a unified network. On this basis, the article identifies three analytical layers: merchants construct the material infrastructure and maritime knowledge base; monastics generate symbolic infrastructure and regulate risk; and monasteries function as intermediary socio-economic institutions within port-city environments. Within this framework, Srivijaya is identified as a paradigmatic case of the institutionalization of merchant–monastic symbiosis, where flows of mobility, knowledge, and symbolic power converge and are structurally reconfigured.

The findings suggest that the pre-ninth-century Indian Ocean network operated as an integrated ecosystem in which trade and Buddhism were not separate spheres but co-constitutive structures. Within this system, the mechanism of mutual support between merchants and monastics constituted a foundational operational logic of the entire maritime order.

Keywords: The mechanisms of mutual support; Merchants and monks; Silk Road; Southeast Asian Buddhism; economic-religious symbiosis; pre-9th century CE.

I. Introduction

Studies on the Silk Road have generally developed along two relatively separate analytical trajectories: one focusing on networks of commodity trade, and the other examining the dissemination of religions and the circulation of knowledge. While this approach facilitates specialization of research objects, it creates a significant gap in reconstructing the actual operational mechanisms of transregional interactions prior to the ninth century.

Specifically, if the entire transport infrastructure along the Indian Ocean maritime routes was primarily controlled by merchants, how did monastic communities manage to travel across such vast and risk-laden maritime spaces? At the same time, what motivated merchants to transport and support passengers who did not directly generate clear economic benefits? These questions raise a broader issue: whether a systematic mechanism of mutual support existed between merchants and monastic communities, or whether their co-presence was merely the incidental outcome of individual voyages.

On this basis, the article poses the following research question: according to what patterns did the mechanisms of mutual support between merchants and monastic communities operate along the Indian Ocean–Southeast Asian maritime routes prior to the ninth century, and what economic–religious consequences did this mechanism produce in the region?

To address this question, the article employs a theoretical framework on the relationship between commercial economies and monastic communities, while also utilizing a combined methodology of classical

Chinese textual analysis and historical comparison. The scope of the study focuses on the period prior to the ninth century, when the Indian Ocean maritime network had become well established but had not yet come under strong control of large-scale state institutions in Southeast Asia, with the principal spatial axis being the Guangzhou–Srivijaya–India route.

II. The “Merit–Merchants–Sangha” Model and a Network Approach to Trade–Religion Interactions

In this study, the “mechanism of mutual support” between merchants and monastic communities is not understood as a set of incidental supportive actions or as driven by individual moral motivations; rather, it is conceptualized as a sustainable system of inter-system exchange operating between two non-state groups of actors within the sphere of transregional interactions prior to the ninth century. This system is constituted through the interaction of three fundamental forms of capital: material capital, including means of transport, finance, and maritime knowledge controlled by merchants; symbolic capital, manifested in religious prestige, merit, and legitimacy generated by monastic communities; and institutional capital, shaped through intermediary institutions such as monasteries, port cities, and scholarly networks. These forms of capital do not exist independently but are mutually convertible through interaction, thereby forming a stable exchange mechanism in which economic and religious benefits are continuously restructured and reinforced.

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the model of “Merit, Merchants and the Buddhist Sangha” proposed by Jason Neelis (2011), according to which the spread of Buddhism was intertwined with commercial networks not as a unidirectional process of dependence, but as the result of sharing a common physical and social infrastructure between the two systems. Within this approach, trade routes function not only as channels for the movement of goods, but also as spaces for the circulation of people, knowledge, and religious practices. Accordingly, merchants and monastic communities are viewed as actors participating within an interconnected network, where flows of material and spiritual capital intertwine and mutually reinforce one another within a shared operational structure.

To further clarify the mechanisms through which different forms of capital are transformed within this system, the study draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic capital,” whereby economic resources may be converted into prestige, reputation, and legitimacy within a given social field. In the Buddhist context, the practice of giving (*dāna*) by merchants carries not only religious significance but also functions as a mechanism for the accumulation of symbolic capital, thereby reinforcing their social standing within transregional commercial and religious networks. Conversely, monastic communities, as agents possessing and distributing symbolic capital, are capable of converting religious prestige into tangible influence over economic behavior, social organization, and the operational structures of port cities.

In addition, this mechanism of mutual support can be interpreted through Marcel Mauss’s theory of gift exchange, according to which acts of giving and receiving in traditional societies are not isolated voluntary actions but are embedded within a system of socially binding obligations. In this context, *dāna* is not merely an ethical act of donation but forms part of a structurally embedded cycle of exchange: merchants provide material resources while receiving spiritual patronage, religious legitimacy, and expanded social networks in return. This cycle contributes to maintaining the stability and long-term cohesion of long-distance maritime trade networks.

From a spatial-structural perspective, the Maritime Silk Road is approached as a dynamic network composed of nodes and links, in which port cities, monasteries, and centers of learning function as key intermediary points. Within this network, merchants and monastic communities do not merely move in a physical sense but also participate in the reconfiguration of flows of goods, information, and religious beliefs. Centers such as Srivijaya may be understood as “nodal hubs,” where flows of material, symbolic, and institutional capital intersect, thereby generating cumulative and amplifying effects at the regional level.

Based on the integration of these approaches, the study proposes a three-tier analytical framework to comprehensively identify the mechanisms of mutual support between merchants and monastic communities, consisting of the material layer (related to transport, finance, and maritime knowledge), the symbolic layer (related to merit, religious prestige, and social legitimacy), and the institutional layer (related to monasteries, port cities, and scholarly networks).

III. The Role of Merchants in Constructing Support Networks for Monastic Communities along Maritime Routes

3.1. Merchant Ships and Trading Caravans as the Transport Infrastructure for Monastic Mobility

In the context of Indian Ocean maritime routes prior to the ninth century, the long-distance mobility of Buddhist monastic communities cannot be understood as an independent form of pilgrimage, but must instead be situated within a transport infrastructure controlled by merchants. Before the emergence of specialized passenger transport, merchant vessels and trading caravans constituted the only viable means for

transregional travel, simultaneously integrating multiple social actors within a shared and extended mobile space.

As noted by Bopearachchi (n.d.), in the ancient world there was no clear distinction between cargo and passenger transport. Merchant caravans, both maritime and overland, performed multifunctional transport roles, carrying merchants, monastic communities, diplomats, philosophers, and other groups of travelers. Under such conditions, the co-presence of merchants and monastic communities cannot be interpreted as a matter of individual or religious choice, but rather as the outcome of a structurally embedded “regime of mobility,” in which access to spaces of movement was entirely mediated through commercial networks. In other words, merchants were not merely participants in mobility, but the agents who controlled the conditions of mobility.

Buddhist textual sources also clearly reflect this structure. In the *Foguo Ji* (《佛國記》), Faxian records that he “boarded a large merchant vessel” (載商人大船) to return to China, traveling alongside merchants and relying on favorable monsoon winds to complete a fourteen-day maritime journey:

「於是載商人大船，帆海西南行，得東初信風，晝夜十四日，到獅子國。」

(Translation: *Thereupon he boarded a large merchant vessel, set sail southwestward, encountered favorable early winter monsoon winds, and after fourteen days and nights arrived in the Kingdom of the Lion—Sri Lanka*) (Legge, 1886 translation).

When analyzed at the structural level, this account demonstrates the complete dependence of monastic communities on three conditions controlled by the commercial system: (i) transport infrastructure (merchant vessels), (ii) environmental knowledge (monsoon winds), and (iii) logistical capacity for long-distance voyages. In this case, monastic communities were not autonomous agents of religious mobility, but participants within a pre-organized transport system structured by long-distance commerce.

This structural characteristic is further reinforced by the case of Yijing (義淨, 635–713 CE), who, upon departing from Guangzhou in 671 CE, boarded a merchant vessel operated by Persian traders (Rong X.J., 2015: 75). This case is particularly significant as it demonstrates that maritime networks did not operate within the confines of a single cultural community, but rather as a trans-cultural system in which merchant groups from China, South Asia, and West Asia jointly participated in a shared transport space.

The fact that a Chinese monastic figure chose to travel on a Persian merchant vessel indicates that transport conditions were not determined by religious or ethnic identity, but by the functional efficiency of a commercial network standardized in terms of mobility. Within this logic, merchant vessels were not merely physical means of transport, but can be understood as a form of “mobile infrastructure,” in which transport functions, the circulation of people, and the organization of social space were integrated within a single operational structure. Therefore, such cases should not be viewed as isolated events in the history of pilgrimage, but rather as evidence of a broader structural model in which merchant vessels and trading caravans constituted the essential infrastructural foundation for the entire system of religious mobility and transregional exchange across the Indian Ocean prior to the ninth century.

3.2. Monsoon Knowledge and the “Invisible Infrastructure” of Maritime Networks

The dependence of monastic communities on merchant vessels extended beyond the level of transport infrastructure to encompass the entire system of maritime knowledge accumulated over generations within Indian Ocean commercial networks. In this context, knowledge of the monsoon functioned as a foundational structural condition, shaping the possibilities, timing, and directions of transregional mobility. The bidirectional monsoon system—northeast and southwest—was not merely a climatic phenomenon, but operated as a mechanism of compulsory temporal coordination for all maritime activities, thereby establishing an ecological temporal framework that governed all decisions of movement.

In the *Nanhai Jigui Neifa Zhuan* (《南海寄歸內法傳》), Yijing records large ocean-going vessels referred to as “kūn-lún bó” (崑崙舶)—a term denoting large ships from Southeast Asian polities—capable of carrying hundreds of passengers along with substantial cargo, and sufficiently robust to traverse the Indian Ocean on long-distance voyages (Aciri, 2018). Complementing this account, the *Liang Shu* (《梁書》), juan 54, also describes merchant fleets operating in the South Seas (南海) as capable of transporting between 600 and 700 individuals. Such scale reflects not only advances in shipbuilding technology but also indicates a high degree of centralization in maritime transport structures, in which merchant vessels constituted the only viable means for transoceanic travel. This further reinforces the argument that monastic communities could not develop an independent transport system and were compelled to integrate into the existing commercial infrastructure.

However, such transport capacity could only function within a complex system of environmental knowledge, in which monsoon knowledge occupied a central role. The northeast monsoon (November–March) and southwest monsoon (May–September) generated a compulsory rhythm for the entire Indian Ocean maritime system, determining both the seasonal timing and directional patterns of navigation. Local seafaring

communities accumulated this knowledge over generations, thereby developing the capacity to coordinate voyages according to a “wind-aligned logic,” enabling fleets to travel in a calculated manner from China through Southeast Asia to India and back.

A crucial point here is the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge: monsoon knowledge did not exist as a universally accessible body of information, but was concentrated within merchant and professional seafaring communities—actors capable of accumulating long-term experiential knowledge within maritime environments. For monastic communities, this meant that environmental knowledge could neither be independently accessed nor verified, but was entirely mediated through merchant groups as an “intermediary filter of knowledge.” Climatic patterns that had been accumulated by maritime communities for at least two millennia prior to the proliferation of Buddhist maritime journeys thus constituted not merely technical knowledge, but a form of social asset institutionalized within commercial practice.

In this context, monsoon knowledge can be understood as a form of “invisible infrastructure” operating in parallel with the material infrastructure of merchant vessels. If merchant ships constituted the physical condition of mobility, then monsoon knowledge functioned as the coordinative condition of that mobility. The combination of these two infrastructures produced a dual operational system in which the mobility of monastic communities was regulated simultaneously by material factors (vessels) and immaterial factors (environmental knowledge), both of which remained under the control of merchant networks.

The structural nature of this mechanism is also indirectly reflected in a significant passage from the *Foguo Ji* (《佛國記》), in which Faxian recounts an incident at sea where a merchant intervened to protect him:

“法顯本檀越言：汝若下此比丘，亦並下我！不爾，便當殺我！汝其下此沙門，吾到漢地，當向國王言汝也。漢地王亦敬信佛法，重比丘僧。”

(Translation: Faxian's patron said: If you intend to cast this monk into the sea, cast me down first! Otherwise, if you cast this śramaṇa into the sea, when I return to the land of Han, I will report this to the king. The king of the Han land also reveres the Buddhist Dharma and respects the monastic community.)

This passage reflects not merely an act of individual protection, but more importantly reveals an implicit recognition of the social position of monastic communities within commercial space. The hesitation of the merchants was not due to legal constraints, but to their awareness of a transregional system of prestige, in which the notion that “the king of the Han land reveres the Buddhist Dharma” functioned as a form of symbolic guarantee. From this perspective, the actions of the merchants reflect a mechanism of “reputational exchange,” whereby the symbolic capital of monastic communities could exert reciprocal influence on economic behavior at sea (Neelis, 2011). This demonstrates that even under conditions of dependence on knowledge and infrastructure, monastic communities still participated in the reconfiguration of power relations within commercial networks.

Thus, monsoon knowledge should not be understood merely as a technical element of navigation, but as a structural component of the Indian Ocean exchange system, in which knowledge, power, and mobility were organized within a stratified, asymmetrical, yet highly integrated mechanism.

3.3. Merchants as Dānapati and the Institutionalization of Economic Patronage

Beyond their functions in transport and maritime knowledge, merchants also assumed the role of dānapati (檀越), that is, economic patrons supporting monastic communities throughout transregional journeys. Within the Buddhist system, the practice of dāna (布施) operates not merely as an act of individual morality, but constitutes an institutionalized mechanism of exchange in which the transfer of material resources is closely tied to the logic of merit accumulation (puñña). This mechanism establishes a framework of religious legitimation, through which economic flows are redefined as a form of investment in a moral and supernatural order.

In the context of transregional commerce, merchant sponsorship of monastic communities encompassed transportation costs, provisions, accommodation, and support at intermediary stops, while also ensuring the conditions necessary for monastics to participate in transregional religious networks. In return, merchants derived not only individual spiritual benefits, but more importantly accumulated a form of symbolic capital that could be converted into social prestige and advantages in trust-based transactions. In this sense, dāna does not represent a loss of assets, but a transformation of value, whereby economic capital is reconstituted into symbolic capital with high social circulation.

Bopearachchi (n.d.) has observed that Buddhist symbols appeared widely on coinage and commercial goods during this period, reflecting the deep penetration of religious logic into everyday economic practices. This phenomenon indicates that Buddhist values did not exist separately from commerce, but were integrated into the very mechanisms of commodity exchange, in which religious prestige functioned as a component of a broader “trust ecology” in long-distance trade.

Archaeological evidence from the Western Ghats region of India, particularly inscriptional systems in Buddhist cave complexes, further substantiates this argument. These epigraphic records document

continuous contributions by merchant caravans, guilds, and trading groups to monasteries and religious institutions, demonstrating that this patronage model was not incidental but persisted over centuries. Within this structure, merchants were not merely participants in economic exchange, but functioned as patrons who sustained and expanded transregional religious spaces (Rees, 2021). This suggests that *dāna* extended beyond the realm of individual acts to become a highly socialized mechanism of resource redistribution.

The institutional nature of this mechanism is further reinforced by Yijing's account in the *Da Tang Xiyu Qiufo Gaoseng Zhuan* (《大唐西域求法高僧傳》), which records that among approximately sixty Chinese monks who traveled by sea to India, most of their journeys were financed by merchants or *dānapati* along the route, in many cases organized as comprehensive arrangements. This indicates that *dānapati* was not an isolated phenomenon based on individual goodwill, but a standardized pattern of action embedded in transregional mobility practices.

Accordingly, although it may be argued that merchant support for monastic communities originated from personal religious motivations and does not necessarily reflect a structural mechanism, a comparison across multiple sources reveals a highly consistent and recurrent pattern. Practices such as economic patronage (*dāna*), co-travel on merchant vessels, and the regular presence of monastic communities at key port cities appear systematically across different spatial and temporal contexts. These patterns cannot be explained as isolated phenomena, but must be understood as manifestations of a standardized logic of exchange within transregional social practice. In this sense, the mechanism of mutual support between merchants and monastic communities can be conceptualized as a form of “extended gift exchange,” in which the boundary between economy and religion is blurred through processes of mutual conversion between material and symbolic capital. This mechanism not only sustained the stability of long-distance trade networks, but also contributed to the institutional foundations linking economic mobility with the diffusion of religion across the Indian Ocean prior to the ninth century.

Synthesizing the three dimensions analyzed above, it becomes evident that the relationship between merchants and monastic communities along Indian Ocean maritime routes before the ninth century was not a collection of incidental interactions, but a systematically structured form of mutual interdependence. These three elements did not operate independently, but were integrated within a network in which the capacity for mobility, the ability to navigate environmental conditions, and the maintenance of socio-economic resources were closely interconnected.

Within this structure, merchant vessels and trading caravans functioned not merely as transport mechanisms, but as the foundational material conditions enabling transregional mobility. However, this capacity became viable only when embedded within a system of monsoon knowledge accumulated and controlled by professional seafaring and merchant communities. At the same time, the long-term sustainability of such journeys depended on the mechanism of *dāna*, in which the transfer of material resources was institutionalized into religious patronage relations, thereby converting into symbolic capital and social prestige.

It can therefore be concluded that merchants were not simply facilitators of monastic mobility, but integral components of the entire system governing transregional movement. Consequently, the spread of Buddhism across the Indian Ocean prior to the ninth century cannot be understood as a unidirectional process of transmission, but rather as the outcome of a “regime of co-mobility,” in which the circulation of goods, knowledge, and religion was co-structured within a shared network of material and social infrastructure.

IV. The Role of Monastic Communities in Constructing Legitimacy and Structuring the Economic Space of Port Cities

4.1. Spiritual Support and the Construction of Symbolic Order in High-Risk Maritime Environments

During maritime voyages across the Indian Ocean prior to the ninth century, while merchants provided the material infrastructure, maritime knowledge, and the institutional framework of *dāna* for monastic communities, the reciprocal dimension of this mechanism of mutual support reveals that monastics were not merely transported subjects, but also agents of symbolic stabilization within high-risk maritime environments. Under conditions in which technical control over nature remained limited, the stability of a voyage was determined not only by navigational skill or the scale of merchant vessels, but also by the capacity to maintain collective psychological order within the entire trading group.

It is within this context that Buddhist monastic communities assumed the role of ritual agents, functioning to regulate risk at the symbolic level. When confronted with storms, rough seas, or situations of loss of control at sea, monastics performed the recitation of *dhāraṇī*, invoked the name of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, and conducted rituals for safety in order to restore psychological stability for the entire group (Chou, 1945). It is important to emphasize that these practices did not constitute peripheral religious supplements, but operated as a form of functional service within the transport system, where risk was structural and could not be eliminated through technical means alone.

Boppearachchi (n.d.) has noted that Buddhist imagery, particularly that of bodhisattvas, appeared widely on coinage, ceramics, and commercial goods, indicating the deep integration of religious systems into everyday economic spaces. This suggests that religion did not stand outside commerce as a separate domain, but was internalized within the very mechanisms of maritime exchange. In other words, maritime commercial space was structured not only by flows of goods and material capital, but also by a layer of symbolic structure sustained by monastic communities.

Two canonical passages from Buddhist travel records clearly illustrate this mechanism. In the *Da Cien Si Sanzang Fashi Zhuan* (《大慈恩寺三藏法師傳》), when Xuanzang's group encountered a violent storm at sea:

「是時同侶商侶數百餘人...船飄復還...眾皆憂惶...法師勸誦觀世音菩薩及呪...俄爾風定...人船無損。」

(Translation: *At that time, there were more than three hundred merchants traveling together... the ship drifted and turned back... all were anxious and fearful... the Master urged the recitation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and incantations... shortly thereafter, the wind subsided... neither people nor ship suffered harm.*) — Huili, *Da Cien Si Sanzang Fashi Zhuan*, juan 1 (cited from Xuanzang, translated by Li Rongxi, 1996).

Similarly, in the *Foguo Ji* (《佛國記》), Faxian describes a structurally analogous situation:

「附商人大舶，循海而還。舶有二百許人。值黑風。水將入舶。眾皆惶懼。即取雜物棄之。顯恐棄其經像，惟一信念觀世音及歸命漢土眾僧。舶任風而去，得無傷壞。」

(Translation: *He boarded a large merchant vessel and returned by sea. The ship carried more than two hundred people. Encountering a violent storm, water was about to enter the vessel, and all were terrified... Faxian, fearing that the scriptures and images might be cast away, devoted himself single-mindedly to invoking Avalokiteśvara and taking refuge in the monastic community of the Han land. The ship drifted with the wind and suffered no damage.*)

The critical point in these cases lies not in miraculous elements or religious interpretation, but in the recurring behavioral structure: in moments of collective crisis, monastic communities became the focal agents for activating belief, thereby restoring the psychological and behavioral order of the entire trading group. The stability of the voyage was not only technicalized by merchants, but also symbolically constructed by monastics. While merchants functioned as providers of material infrastructure (vessels, monsoon knowledge, and *dāna*), monastic communities provided the symbolic infrastructure necessary to sustain the operation of those material structures under conditions of instability. These two dimensions did not exist separately but operated as a mutually reinforcing mechanism: merchants enabled mobility, while monastics enabled that mobility to become socially viable.

Thus, monastic communities cannot be understood merely as religious passengers, but rather as functional agents within the Indian Ocean maritime system, where they assumed the role of crisis regulators through the maintenance of symbolic order in high-risk maritime environments.

4.2. Monastic Communities and the Mechanism of Maritime Route Orientation through Buddhist Centers

If Section 4.1 demonstrates that monastic communities participated in stabilizing symbolic order in situations of crisis, then at another structural level, they simultaneously functioned as agents directly involved in shaping the spatial orientation of the entire maritime network. This is particularly evident in the operational mechanisms of coastal Buddhist centers, where monasteries were not merely religious institutions but also served as nodal points in organizing and regulating the flows of both monastics and merchants.

This mechanism operated along two complementary dimensions: the convergence effect and the directive effect. At the first level, major Buddhist centers in port cities generated a form of institutional attraction, rendering them nearly indispensable توقف points in long-distance maritime voyages. This was not only due to religious demand but also to the practical functions provided by monasteries, including accommodation, information networks, commodity exchange, and connections with local merchants. In this context, the presence of monastic communities did not simply follow established trade routes; rather, they contributed to reinforcing the necessity of these توقف points, thereby increasing the density of social interactions at port cities.

At the second level, eminent monks acted as knowledge brokers, producing orientational knowledge and offering directive recommendations that guided the journeys of other monastics, and thereby indirectly shaped the movement patterns of accompanying merchants. The case of Yijing provides a structurally illustrative example of this mechanism. In *Nanhai Jigui Neifa Zhuan* (《南海寄歸內法傳》), he writes:

“If eminent monks wish to travel westward to listen to and study the Dharma, it is best that they remain here for one or two years to learn the monastic regulations before proceeding to Central India; this

would indeed be appropriate.” — Yijing, *Nanhai Jigui Neifa Zhuan*, juan 1 (annotated edition by Wang Bangwei, 1995: 128)

Formally, this recommendation appears as scholarly guidance; however, in terms of its social function, it operates as a form of institutional signal capable of restructuring mobility behavior across the entire network. Yijing’s proposal of Srivijaya as a necessary *останов* point for scholarly preparation not only reflects personal experience but also contributes to legitimizing Srivijaya’s position as a center of Buddhist knowledge transmission within the Indian Ocean space. As such recommendations were reiterated and adopted by other monastic groups, they generated a predictable flow of both people and goods through specific nodal locations.

From a structural perspective, it is crucial to note that centers such as Srivijaya did not merely attract monastics; rather, monastic communities themselves played a role in establishing the priority of these port cities. As monastic groups *останов*ed for study, exchange, and residence, they simultaneously stimulated an increase in associated commercial activities. Consequently, merchants did not simply transport monastics as a distinct category of passengers; they also had to adjust their *маршрутов* to align with these religious-academic stopping points. Thus, the mechanism of maritime route orientation was not solely the outcome of economic logic but rather the result of an interplay between religious knowledge and commercial operations.

Notably, this mechanism was not coercively imposed by a single center of authority but functioned through a form of “distributed standardization.” Over time, the accumulated and repeatedly applied recommendations of monastic communities gradually produced a socially constructed maritime map, in which Buddhist port cities became anchoring points for both material and intellectual flows.

In summary, if merchants provided the “routes” in a material sense, monastic communities supplied the “logic of route selection” in symbolic and epistemic terms. These two layers overlapped to form a highly integrated system of maritime orientation, within which economic and religious dimensions were inseparable in the actual operation of pre-ninth-century maritime networks.

4.3. Monasteries as Socio-Economic Institutions and the Infrastructuralization of Port-City Space

While the previous two sections have examined monastic communities as agents of symbolic stabilization and as actors orienting spatial movement, at a deeper structural level their role is most clearly manifested in the construction and operation of monasteries as socio-economic institutions within port cities. In the context of the pre-ninth-century Indian Ocean maritime world, monasteries cannot be understood as spaces detached from economic life; rather, they constituted an integrated component of the infrastructural framework underpinning interregional commercial networks.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the economic embeddedness of monasteries in premodern Buddhist societies. Williams Oerberg (2021) demonstrates that many monasteries operated on resources provided by *dānapati*, while also directly engaging in land management, organizing production, and participating in commodity exchange networks. In a similar vein, Geok Yian Goh (2021) shows that within Theravāda Buddhist polities in mainland Southeast Asia, monasteries functioned not only as religious institutions but also as mechanisms of resource redistribution, with the capacity to directly shape the economic structures of urban and coastal port environments. These observations provide a foundation for understanding monasteries as institutional infrastructures within maritime commercial space.

The internal operational mechanisms of monasteries are clearly described in Yijing’s *Nanhai Jigui Neifa Zhuan* (《南海寄歸內法傳》):

「施主本捨村莊，元為濟給僧眾... 供食之餘充衣非損。」
「是以租地與他、分苗而食，方為正命省緣自活。」
「或可共餘人戶，咸並六分抽一。」

(Translation: *Donors grant villages... the surplus after providing food may be used for clothing without being considered a loss. Thus, land is leased out and its yield shared... or one-sixth of the produce may be collected.*) — Yijing, *Nanhai Jigui Neifa Zhuan*, juan 2 (annotated by Wang Bangwei, 1995)

These passages indicate that monasteries operated as semi-autonomous economic institutions, in which resources were not directly consumed but were restructured through mechanisms of land allocation and yield-sharing. In particular, the practice of “leasing land and sharing its produce” demonstrates that monasteries were not merely sites of consumption dependent on *dānapati* support, but active agents participating in local production and economic redistribution. Within this logic, monastic communities were not only recipients of patronage but also organizers of resource flows within port-city environments.

When considered in relation to Section 3—particularly the mechanism of *dāna* enacted by merchants as *dānapati*—a circular structure becomes evident: merchants supplied material resources to monasteries; monasteries transformed these resources into infrastructures of subsistence, knowledge, and services; and these infrastructures, in turn, served merchants during periods of *توقف*, monsoon waiting, and the reorganization of voyages. In other words, monasteries did not merely receive commercial capital but actively restructured it into stable forms of social infrastructure.

Archaeological evidence from the Western Ghats of India, especially inscriptional systems in Buddhist cave complexes, further substantiates this argument. These inscriptions record the sustained involvement of merchant guilds, trade groups, and commercial communities in funding, constructing, and maintaining monastic establishments (Rees, 2021). This demonstrates that monasteries were not isolated institutions but integral nodes within a broader socio-economic network, where flows of resources, belief, and human mobility were integrated within a single operational structure.

From a systems perspective, monasteries may be conceptualized as dual infrastructure nodes: simultaneously religious-intellectual infrastructures managed by monastic communities and economic-logistical infrastructures sustained by merchants through the mechanism of *dāna*. It is precisely this dual character that rendered monasteries indispensable in structuring Indian Ocean port-city spaces, where the boundary between religion and economy became increasingly indistinct.

Taken together, the three mechanisms analyzed above demonstrate that the role of monastic communities in the pre-ninth-century Indian Ocean maritime sphere cannot be reduced to a purely religious function, but must be understood as a structural component directly involved in the construction and operation of port-city economic spaces. At the first level, monastics generated a layer of symbolic order that regulated risk within an uncertain maritime environment. At the second level, through their epistemic authority and advisory functions, they contributed to maritime route orientation, facilitating the emergence of central nodes such as Srivijaya and rendering the movements of both monastics and merchants convergent and predictable. At the third level, through the institution of the monastery, monastic communities were deeply embedded in organizing the socio-economic infrastructure of port cities, transforming religious spaces into centers of resource distribution and service provision with genuine logistical functions within commercial networks.

When considered in relation to Section 3—where merchants are identified as the agents constructing material infrastructure (ships), intangible infrastructure (monsoon knowledge), and institutional infrastructure (*dāna*)—Section 4 reveals a complementary and symmetrical dimension: monastic communities were the agents constructing symbolic infrastructure, orientational infrastructure, and the infrastructuralization of port-city social space. These two systems did not exist independently in parallel but operated as a mutually constitutive structure, in which each side both depended upon and reproduced the conditions of the other's existence.

V. Srivijaya in the Indian ocean network: a model of symbiosis between commerce and Buddhism

5.1. Srivijaya as a Structural Intermediary Node in the Indian Ocean Maritime Network

Srivijaya (三佛齊) may be understood as a structural intermediary node within the Indian Ocean maritime network, where the movements of merchants and monastic communities converged, were redistributed, and reconfigured. Its control over the Strait of Malacca—the gateway between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea—enabled Srivijaya to regulate the flow of trade. More importantly, however, it transformed this spatial regulatory capacity into a form of institutional power grounded in Buddhism and knowledge systems.

The operational structure of Srivijaya was formed through a self-reinforcing cycle: merchants stopped due to commercial needs (commodity exchange, waiting for monsoon winds, resupply), while monastic communities stopped for scholarly pursuits and religious practice. These two streams of movement did not exist separately but overlapped within the same port-city space, making Srivijaya an almost indispensable *نقطة* of convergence in transregional journeys.

According to Manguin (2021), the development of Srivijaya was closely linked to the role of Buddhist centers as mechanisms for attracting commerce, while commerce itself provided the material resources necessary to sustain these institutions. This demonstrates that Srivijaya was neither a byproduct of trade nor of religion, but rather the result of a co-structuration between the two domains within an integrated spatial framework.

5.2. Monastic Communities and Knowledge Accumulation as the Soft Infrastructure of Port Cities

An important indicator of Srivijaya's institutional character is the scale of its monastic community as recorded by Yijing:

「佛逝城中，僧眾千餘，學問修善，并用法國，規矩儀式，一行無別。」

(Translation: *In the city of Fo-shi [Srivijaya], there are more than a thousand monks, devoted to learning and cultivation, all following the practices of the Dharma-land [India], with uniform regulations and rituals.*) — Yijing, *Nanhai Jigui Neifa Zhuan*, juan 1 (annotated by Wang Bangwei, 1995)

The figure of “more than one thousand monks” reflects not only religious scale but, more importantly, the existence of an organized knowledge ecosystem, in which monasteries functioned as centers for the copying, standardization, and circulation of Buddhist texts across regions. As Skilling (2011) has

demonstrated, port cities such as Srivijaya served as sites where Buddhist texts circulated through incremental accumulation at successive توقف points, rather than through a linear transmission system.

Within this structure, monastic communities functioned as a form of soft knowledge infrastructure. They not only preserved Buddhist knowledge but also created a shared epistemic foundation that reduced communication costs in the multilingual and multiethnic environment of Indian Ocean trade. This transformed Srivijaya from a mere stopping point into a space for the accumulation and standardization of interregional knowledge.

5.3. The Institutionalization of Merchant–Monastic Symbiosis and the Integrated Port-City Model

Built upon material infrastructure (merchant vessels), intangible infrastructure (monsoon knowledge), and institutional infrastructure (dāna and monasteries), Srivijaya demonstrates the transformation of merchant–monastic relations from a level of mutual support to that of politico-economic institutionalization.

During periods of waiting for monsoon winds, merchants and monastics jointly participated in activities such as the copying of scriptures, exchange of knowledge, and the establishment of social networks. This generated a dual accumulation mechanism: merchants accumulated economic capital and networks of trust; monastics accumulated intellectual capital and religious prestige; and Srivijaya accumulated its position as an indispensable transshipment center within the Indian Ocean network.

According to Wolters (1967), the key to Srivijaya's success did not lie in geography or military power, but in its capacity to sustain networks of relations with both merchants and monastic communities. The presence of these two groups rendered Srivijaya an unavoidable نقطة in both commercial and pilgrimage journeys. In particular, the shift from Central Asian overland routes to Southeast Asian maritime routes—amid the weakening of Central Asian networks—further enhanced the role of intermediary nodes such as Srivijaya. While maritime routes offered greater transport efficiency, they also entailed higher environmental risks, as described by Yijing:

「重雲暗晝，長無惑午之辰；密雨連宵，終罕疑更之夜。」

(Translation: Heavy clouds darken the day, making noon seem endlessly prolonged; dense rains fall through the night, rarely allowing for a clear sky even at the late watch.) — Yijing, *Nanhai Jigui Neifa Zhuan* (annotated by Wang Bangwei, 1995)

Within this context of uncertainty, Srivijaya functioned not merely as a technical توقف point but as an institutional anchoring point, where risk was transformed into opportunities for network accumulation and the generation of economic and symbolic value.

In summary, Srivijaya was not a singular political entity but a fully institutionalized model of merchant–monastic symbiosis within the Indian Ocean network: encompassing material infrastructure (vessels and transport routes), intangible infrastructure (monsoon knowledge), and institutional infrastructure (Buddhism and dāna). Crucially, the mutual support between merchants and monastic communities was not merely a functional relationship but had evolved into the institutional structure of port-city space. Within this structure, economic activity could not operate independently of religion, and knowledge could not be separated from commercial logistics. In other words, Srivijaya provides the clearest evidence that the pre-ninth-century Indian Ocean network did not function as a purely commercial system, but rather as an integrated ecosystem of transport, knowledge, and symbolic power, in which merchants and monastic communities constituted the fundamental structural foundation.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the mechanisms of mutual support between merchants and monastic communities along the Indian Ocean maritime routes prior to the ninth century were not a collection of random or individualized acts of assistance, but rather a systematically structured mode of operation formed through the interaction of three components: material infrastructure, symbolic infrastructure, and institutional infrastructure.

At the structural level, merchants played a foundational role in constructing the material conditions of transregional mobility, including merchant vessels, knowledge of monsoon patterns, and the mechanism of dāna, thereby controlling the conditions of possibility for the entire system. In contrast, monastic communities were responsible for constructing symbolic order through ritual practices and the accumulation of religious authority, while also participating in the orientation of spatial movement and the structuring of port-city nodes through the institution of the monastery. The interaction between these two groups did not operate as a one-directional dependency, but rather as a process of co-structuration, in which each side both depended upon and reproduced the conditions of the other's existence. It is precisely this mechanism that generated a regime of co-mobility, within which economy, religion, and knowledge did not exist as separate domains but were integrated within a single transregional operational network.

The case of Srivijaya most clearly illustrates the degree of institutionalization of this mechanism, as the symbiosis between merchants and monastic communities was elevated into a stable politico-economic structure, in which port cities functioned not only as points of commodity transshipment but also as spaces for the accumulation of knowledge, religious authority, and symbolic power.

It may therefore be concluded that the pre-ninth-century Maritime Silk Road should not be understood merely as a trade route, but rather as an integrated ecosystem in which mobility, exchange, and religious belief were co-structured. Within this ecosystem, merchants and monastic communities were not separate spheres, but two foundational pillars of a single historical network, in which economy and religion simultaneously constituted both the conditions and the outcomes of one another.

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