

The Early Maritime Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia: Ports, Routes, and Communities

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Abstract

This paper sketches the early maritime Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia by focusing on the entries of trade ports, trade routes, and Chinese communities. It discusses the interconnected linkages in the making of ports, routes, and Chinese communities and highlights the key roles of Chinese diaspora in the China-Southeast Asian context and early maritime historical interactions.

Key words: Early maritime, Chinese diaspora, trade ports, trade routes, Chinese communities, Southeast Asia

Introduction

By “the early maritime Chinese diaspora,” my understanding is that underlining the title are three interconnected parameters of time, place, and Chinese migrants. Each of these parameters should have its specific historical dimensions. The issues of “maritime” and “Chinese diaspora” are definite and scholars should have no big quarrel over their implications. The most problematic issue might be centred around the definition of “the early”. Many controversial problems could be raised then: First, from the perspective of Chinese migration, how to we define the term “the early”? Should the parameter be interpreted from the perspective of the *qiaoxiang* (侨乡) or the native towns and villages of Chinese diaspora or of the host societies? Would this have a fundamental difference in the way we define “the early”? For example, there is documentary evidence to show that the Chinese migrated to Southeast Asia two thousand years ago, whereas they arrived in North America and Australia only from the mid-nineteenth century, and to Europe just before the twentieth century. In Africa, although some Chinese were shipped to South Africa by the Portuguese as early as 1593, and three Chinese were shipped from the Dutch Batavia to Mauritius, it was not until the turn of the eighteenth century that sizable Chinese migration to Africa took place either directly from Guangdong or via Southeast Asia (Li, 2012).

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Moreover, “the early” should be placed in historical context to satisfy at least two fundamental conditions: one is the scale of Chinese migration; the other is the timing that shaped the scale of Chinese migration. The former suggests that the scale of Chinese emigration should be significant enough so that they could form a sizeable Chinese diaspora. The latter implies that a dual issue of how “the early” maritime Chinese diaspora shaped “the modern” Chinese migration, and vice versa. In other words, “the early maritime” Chinese diaspora should coincide with “the early modern” period in human history, roughly correspondent to the early colonial period prior to the rise of Western imperialism and the subsequent massive Chinese emigration.

Under these circumstances, the issue of time concerning “the early” maritime Chinese diaspora is defined as the period between the fifteenth century and the mid-1850s. For technical considerations, especially over long-distance transnational migration, the early Chinese diaspora was constrained by the means of transport. Geographical and geopolitical factors were similarly significant in shaping Sino-foreign interactions. Hence, “the maritime” should be made in reference to the seas that connected China with foreign countries through historical linkages via geography, trade, and politics. The early maritime Chinese migration was therefore referred to as a movement to “Nanyang”, literally the “South Seas”, which soon became an idea that conveyed the image of a sprawling region that was later formally known as Southeast Asia. “Nanyang” had for centuries constituted the most important “water frontier”, or a form of “Asian Mediterranean”, that also formed a vital component of “the Maritime Silk Road”. It is the region with which China has the longest interaction through trade and migration. For the global commercial interactions, Nanyang’s maritime significance lay in its extraordinary unifying linkages with various areas and isolated societies, unifying a vast region from the Andaman Sea, the Gulf of Thailand, the Java, Sulu, and South China Seas. As Anthony Reid (2000: 3) writes, “It was the region most affected by the explosion of Chinese maritime activity at the beginning of the fifteenth century, and the source of the spices and much of the pepper that drew the Spanish to America and eventually in the Philippines, and the Portuguese to India and Southeast Asia.” It is also the area that Chinese diasporas are overwhelmingly concentrated, and free from the economic and social marginalization as in North America, Australia, and Europe. Hence, on the issue of place, the focus of this study is that of the “Nanyang” region.

The Ports and Entrepôts

In shaping the long-distance trade of transnational nature, the ports or entrepôts, as usual play critical roles. This is a distinct pattern for the formation of Southeast Asian cities and commercial activities. In the age of commerce, the major cities of Southeast Asia were located either along the coast or at the estuary of navigable rivers. These cities were major meeting points for long-distance trans-regional or intra-regional trading communities such as the Arabs,

Chinese, Indians, Japanese, Malays, Minangkabau, Javanese, Cham, Luzon, and Pegu. They also doubled as the power centres of international, regional, and local politics.

Within the region, such ports included Angkor of the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers, Ayutthaya on the Chao Phraya River, Pasai and Palembang in Sumatra, Patani and Melaka in the Malay Peninsula, Banten and Batavia in Java, Makassar in Sulawesi, Brunei (now Bandar Seri Begawan) in what is now Brunei Darussalam, Manila in Luzon Island, and Hoi An in Vietnam (Reid, 1993). Beyond the region, on the China side, centred on the trading ports in Fujian and Guangdong were “qiaoxiang” and their ports of embarkation. On the Nanyang side, centred on the trading ports were clusters of Chinese communities, whose emergence coincided with the rise of these ports. Trading ports were the key linkage points between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, making maritime or monsoon Asia an integrated whole, in which the Chinese diaspora formed the core “corridor” between China and Nanyang via remittances, correspondence, migration chains, and emotional attachments. According to Philip Kuhn (2006: 163; 2008), the corridor bridged the immigrant and indigenous societies and functioned as “a cultural space that transmits people, wealth and information in both directions”.

In the context of maritime trade, the ports were usually regionally or transnationally oriented. In the case of China, Quanzhou, having for centuries been the most important trading port, was joined by a string of such ports as Nakasaki in Japan, Manila in the Spanish Philippines, Portuguese Macau and Melaka, the Dutch Batavia, and Siamese Bangkok. Quanzhou was subsequently overtaken by Amoy (Xiamen) and Canton (Guangzhou) as new trading ports in Penang, Singapore, and Hong Kong emerged.

Chinese traders played a key role in the maritime interaction between South China and Southeast Asia. According to Lockard (2010: 228),

During the age of commerce [ca 1400-1750] Melaka, Hoi An, and Ayutthaya all had important trade (and sometimes political) links with China and all developed resident communities of Chinese, mostly Hokkien, merchants in these centuries. These Chinese settlers became the basis for distinctive hybrid communities blending Chinese and Southeast Asian cultures.

Chinese communities in Nanyang facilitated “the treaty port connection” and played a special role in China’s entry into the modern age. As Godley (1981: 259) commented:

Inevitably, as they had done before, the Overseas Chinese continued to build bridges to China. So much so that they insured that the corridor of modern, mobile, and frequently interchangeable personalities characteristic of the bourgeoisie would continue to link the interests of the treaty ports with those of the neighbouring tropics. And, along that invisible highway, personnel, ideas, and wherewithal travelled back and forth from China.

The rise and fall of trading ports both in China and Southeast Asia coincided with the shift in international power relations among the major powers and the inevitable changes in the trading routes. At the international level, dominating the scene was the shifting balance of power between the old European empires of Spain and Portugal and the emerging ones of the Netherlands and Britain. The early international entrepôts in Southeast Asia were Portuguese Melaka and Spanish Manila. These were subsequently over-shadowed by Dutch Batavia and British Singapore. At the regional level, the period before the arrival of the Europeans in the fifteenth century and the rise of the Dutch and the British imperialism had witnessed several transitional phases in the shifting dominance of trading ports among Hoi An, Palembang, Ayutthaya, Bangkok, and Penang. Five major shifts that occurred between the early fifteenth century and the 1850s were demarcated by Anthony Reid (1996). The first shift took place between 1450 and 1520, when Melaka was the major international entrepôt that connected three principal trade systems of the western Indian Ocean, Java Sea and South China Sea. The second shift occurred between 1567 and 1640, when Manila emerged as another major international port that contributed to the shaping of the world system not only between Asia and America, but also between East and Southeast Asia. The third one, from 1680 to 1740, coincided with the heyday of the junk trade when Dutch Batavia probably replaced Portuguese Melaka and Spanish Manila. The fourth shift took place between 1740 and 1850, when Batavia was superseded initially by British Penang and then Singapore.

Chinese trading communities congregated at various key port cities scattered along coastal and estuarine areas of Southeast Asia. In the early fifteenth century, prosperous Chinese trading settlements had developed in the ports of Palembang and Gresik, where Cantonese migrants played dominant roles. In the 1560s, some 2,000 Chinese “pirates” had turned Patani into their commercial base and extended their networks as far as Brunei by 1600. A merchant enclave comprising 3,000 Chinese had also existed in Banten, and in 1642, there were between 4,000 and 5,000 Chinese in Hoi An (Reid, 1996: 27 and 39). In Java, for example, according to Gerrit Knaap (1999: 408-409):

The ports of Java in the early modern period were very different from what we call a ‘port’ today....The port-cities which lay on this shallow coast were usually clusters of unwallled village-like settlements. Many of these settlements were reserved exclusively for non-Javanese communities of seafarers and traders, such as Chinese, Indians, Malays, Sulawesians, and so forth. Most of the ports had a relatively small population: less than 10,000. In the 1700s Batavia, Semarang, and Surabaya were the only places which had populations of between 10,000 and 30,000. The port cities were usually the hub of the economy in their region, in which they functioned as an inlet for imports or an outlet for exports for remote hinterlands, to which they were connected by networks of small roads and/or rivers.

Immigration and Trade Routes

The migration routes were generally coincident with the trade routes that connected the ports. In early maritime interactions, trade and migration were complementary processes. There were two major maritime routes in Southeast Asia, namely, the eastern and western oceanic routes, where the maritime ports were located. Trade and migration became the dynamic forces for the formation of maritime ports, which in turn forged a network of routes for the conduct of trade and the movements of people. The ports that were located along the trade and migration routes were intimately related; the shifting fortunes of one would invariably impact on those of the other. The vicissitudes of fortunes of ports and trade routes were inseparably linked to the shifting power relations of political economy at the levels of the local, national, regional, and transregional.

The Chinese cartographical construction of Nanyang was one involving “the western ocean” and “the eastern ocean”. The former embraced a broad swathe of Southeast Asia including Indo-China, the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Java, and the southwestern coastal sultanates of Borneo. The latter connected the Philippines Islands, the Moluccas, Sulawesi, and the northern Borneo state of Brunei (see 吴晗/Wu Han, 1936: 137-186; 何凤瑶/He Fengyao, 1994: 78-81). Interestingly, this Chinese construction is comparable to the seventeenth century Japanese cartographical construction of the Pacific Ocean into “the small eastern sea” and “the large eastern sea” in which the former comprised the portion of the Pacific closest to Asia and the Japanese Archipelago, and the latter extending to the North American continent (Yonemoto, 1999: 169-187).

The western ocean and the eastern ocean provided two main routes connecting China and Nanyang. Sailing from Fujian, the western sea route followed the China coast to central Guangdong, and subsequently to Hainan, the Champa coast and Pulau Condore at the southern tip of Vietnam. From there the sea route could split into three directions to Siam, northwestern Borneo or the east coast of the Malay Peninsula. The western sea route was of great antiquity dating back to the Tang dynasty and had as many as 125 possible stop-overs. It was mainly used by the merchants from the Indian Ocean and served as the principal sea route during the Song dynasty. The eastern sea route developed initially from Quanzhou and subsequently from Yuegang (Moon Harbour), both in Fujian, via Taiwan to the Philippines, the Sulu zone, northern Borneo, and further south to the Celebes Sea and the Moluccas. This was a relatively new shipping route that emerged during the Song dynasty and had some 46 stop-overs. Trade along this route prospered during the Yuan dynasty when the western route was no longer as dominant as before. The ban on private trade during the reign of Hongwu Emperor of the Ming dynasty witnessed the decline of the eastern route, and further exacerbated by widespread piracy and smuggling activities. Official contacts were then restricted largely to the western sea routes. It was not until 1567 when the ban was lifted that the eastern route revived and flourished (Blusse, 1996: 51-76; Ptak, 1998: 269-294). Situated between the western

and eastern sea routes was the important convergent port of Brunei on the northern coast of Borneo. It emerged as a prominent international trading port over three centuries extending from the mid-sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries (聂德宁/Nie Dening, 2008: 78-84). When the eastern sea route was abandoned in the mid-fifteenth century, Fujian and Guangdong as well as Sino-Southeast Asian traders based in the ports of Indo-China, Siam, and Malay Peninsula sailed by the western sea route to Brunei and thence to Mindanao and Luzon (Reid, 1996: 35-36).

The rise of Melaka in 1511 under Portugal rule and of Manila in 1571 under the Spanish witnessed the formation of two influential Chinese trading communities that transformed these ports as international entrepôts in Southeast Asia linking Macau in South China, the Indian Ocean in the west and the Pacific Ocean in the east. The rise of these early entrepôts in Southeast Asia also heralded the ascendancy of Portuguese and Spanish imperialism. Manila had emerged as a major entrepôt largely for the galleon trade across the Pacific. On the South China Sea, a trading network comprising the ports of Canton, Manila and Macau had been in existence for several centuries. In the case of Melaka, however, its commanding location on the Straits of Melaka had ensured its unrivalled significance in East-West trade in general and the China-Southeast Asia trade in particular. Despite being overshadowed by the subsequent rise of Batavia, Bangkok and Penang, the strategic importance of Melaka in international commerce was confirmed by the emergence of Singapore. The location of Singapore was pivotal in reshaping the alignment of trade routes between the principal ports of China, India, and the West. This development coincided with, and was heavily influenced by, the arrival of Dutch and British imperial domination in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the rise of Bangkok that replaced Ayutthaya in Siam and Saigon that bypassed Hoi An in Cochinchina, and the creation of treaty ports along the China coast such as Hong Kong, Canton, Shantou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai, contributed collectively to the realignment of the trading and shipping routes.

Chinese Communities

Early Chinese communities in Southeast Asia congregated at the maritime ports and immediate hinterlands. Prior to the Zheng He voyages in the early fifteenth century, Chinese trading communities of up to a few thousand persons were already present in Surabaya of Java and Palembang of Sumatra. By the early seventeenth century, these communities were found in Manila, Batavia, Surabaya and Banten in Java, Melaka, Patani and Kelantan in the northeast of the Malay Peninsula, Dacheng in Siam, and Bamo in Burma. There was also a fairly large community in Nakasaki, Japan. In 1603, there were 25,000 Chinese in the Philippines, probably the largest Chinese communities overseas; while the Chinese merchant community in Nakasaki had between 20,000 and 30,000 persons at the end of the sixteenth century. By the first half

of the seventeenth century, Chinese communities in Southeast Asia numbered about 100,000 or so, increasing to 1.5 million by the mid-nineteenth century (庄国土/Zhuang Guotu, 2011: 5-8).

Frederic Wakeman (1993: 15-16) paints a vivid picture of the early phases of Chinese immigration to various parts of Southeast Asia:

During the later years of the fifteenth century, Chinese began to colonize the Malay Archipelago, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, the Sulu Archipelago, and the Philippines. In the sixteenth century, another stream of Chinese settlers began to arrive in Siam, and by the end of the 1600s there were thousands in the capital of Ayutthaya. The Qing (1644-1912) government continued the Ming policy of forbidding emigration. ... Individual emperors issued pardons to overseas merchants, who returned home, but not until 1727 was the interdiction removed; by then, hundreds of thousands of Chinese were living abroad. A century later, virtually half the 400,000 residents of Bangkok were Chinese immigrants.

In terms of dialect group and ethnicity, early immigrant Chinese communities in Southeast Asia were primarily Hokkiens (Minnan) from the southern part of Fujian province. There were also considerable numbers of Hakkas (Kejia), Cantonese (Guangfu), and Teochews (Chaozhou). The Hokkiens were largely concentrated in the ports and coastal towns, and the Cantonese and Teochews traders and artisans in the towns. The Hakkas, however, tended to congregate in gold or tin mining localities in west Kalimantan and the Malay Peninsula respectively. In the larger towns, some have intermarried with indigenous women and gave rise to, according to Skinner (1996), different “creolized Chinese societies”. These societies had appeared after the coming of European rule. Three distinctive creolized Chinese groups were the Mestizo in the Philippines, the Peranakan in Java, and the Baba in the Straits Settlements. The mother tongues, food, clothing, and housing of the creolized communities were neither indigenous nor Chinese, but an acculturation the outcome of which was the blending of indigenous and Chinese elements. A distinctive feature of creolized communities was that even the offspring were normally not incorporated into indigenous societies (Skinner, 1996).

However, mainstream Chinese communities other than the creolized components consisted of divergent groups in response to their adaptation to economic and environmental conditions. Each group had come about not because of acculturation but rather an accentuation of its culture in the search for survival in different environments. Cases in point are two distinct Chinese communities in Batavia and Kalimantan in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (see Blusse, 2003). One was a Hokkien community from south Fujian, and the other was a Hakka community from the mountainous outback of Fujian and Guangdong. Each had occupied markedly different economic and physical environments: one being an urban trading community under Dutch colonial authorities in Batavia, and the other was a gold mining

community in the uncharted rainforests of West Kalimantan and subjected to control by hostile Malay rulers at the river mouths and fierce Dayak tribes living up-river. Both had evolved similar self-government schemes, namely, the *Kapitan Cina* (Chinese headman) and *kongkoan* (Chinese Council) in the case of Batavia, and the *kongsi* or organization operating along lines of a Chinese-style governance remotely resembling that of a western republic in the case of Kalimantan (see Wang, T.P., 1995). Both, however, shared a common feature in that neither community gave up their cultural and institutional social set-up but instead accentuated self-consciousness of their own identity and ethnicity (Blusse, 2003). They transplanted their traditions of organizing their socio-economic activities and nurturing their cultural heritage. At a time when colonial rule was still at its infancy, it was relatively easy for the Chinese diaspora to cultivate a sense of “Chineseness” in foreign territories and to stand out rather distinctly because a non-Chinese “other” was available as a standard of self-comparison (Fernandez-Armesto, 2003: 201).

Three typical institutions formed the key social organizations and leadership of the Chinese communities, namely, the *kapitan* system, the secret societies, and the *kongsi* system. The Chinese *kapitan* system was a “legitimate” mechanism in the appointment of Chinese communal headmen that was employed in the Portuguese, Dutch, and English colonial territories including the Malay states. The *kapitans* were men of power and wealth, and were officially vested with certain executive, administrative, and even judicial powers within their own communities. It was essentially an intermediary system and a product of the indirect rule as it provided a convenient link between the immigrant Chinese communities and the colonial and indigenous authorities. Its origin, duration, and structure varied in different places in Southeast Asia. The first Chinese *kapitans* were appointed in Portuguese Melaka in 1511 and in Dutch Batavia in 1619. The Netherlands Indies devised a hierarchical structure whereby the Chinese *kapitan* was ranked above the majors, lieutenants, and even sergeants. The *kapitan* system persisted in Southeast Asia until the end of the nineteenth century, and was still in practice in some Malay states until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Running parallel with the “legitimate” Chinese *kapitan* system were the so-called “secret societies,” an overall term encompassing all putatively “illicit” Chinese organizations in Southeast Asia. They were forms of internal governance within the larger local context of Southeast Asian settings. For this reason, secret societies are not treated here as disparate elements on their own, or as “criminal gangs,” “primitive rebels,” or “mutual aid” societies with particular ritual and brotherhood ties in relation to national politics. Instead, they will be revealed as functioning as new creations of Chinese internal political form, co-existing alongside the colonial and indigenous states, and part of a historical process in line with Southeast Asian political development.

The term *kongsi* was used to refer loosely to any association of the Chinese, ranging from a business partnership to community governance in West Kalimantan, secret societies, and clan associations. It functioned as a form of open government in the early modern Southeast Asian

Chinese societies of the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, based on extended partnerships and brotherhoods. In comparison to either the kapitan system or the secret societies, the kongsi served important economic and political functions.

These social organizations provided overlapping, complementary but differentiated forms of leadership for immigrants in the host societies. The kapitan system was an official and legitimate institution representing the community to the colonial and local government and other communities. The kongsi system created a public office, open government, and economic entities founded on extended partnerships and brotherhoods. The kapitan could also be the headman of a secret society or of a kongsi. But the headmen of the secret societies or kongsi would not necessarily be the kapitans.

Behind the kapitan system, secret societies, and kongsi loomed the important *towkays* whose wealth supported and maintained the power of these institutions. These were wealthy and successful proprietors whose business interests could spread across such enterprises as revenue farming, tin-mining, the plantations, and commerce and trade. Prior to the late nineteenth century, the towkays were also the headmen of the kapitan system, secret societies, or kongsi institutions. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, independent groups of wealthy towkays also emerged in other areas of entrepreneurship. The towkays and their family estates played dominant roles in their support and sponsorship of temples, schools, *hui-kuan* (clan associations), chambers of commerce, and various organizations that formed the essential public spheres of life of Chinese communities (Wu, 2010: 22-25).

Defining Characteristics

Maritime situations not only united the fragmented and diversified Southeast Asian region into an integral whole, but also defined China-Southeast Asian interactions that were sustained by Chinese migration and trade. China's two coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong had been the major sources of Chinese emigrants for centuries. On the one hand, overland distance had kept these provinces apart from the political nerve centre in north China and, on the other, the coastal location had facilitated easy access to the Southeast Asian region. These geoeconomic and geopolitical factors were fundamental in shaping the formation of the numerous "qiaoxiang" that were dispersed over the extended coastline and hinterlands of south China.

From the perspective of global history, the period under study was shaped by two great events in world history. The Zheng He voyages were the first, and these were likely to have resulted in the appearance of Chinese communities in various localities. The other was the "Great Discovery" that spawned initially Portuguese and Spanish imperialism and subsequently that of the Dutch, British, and French in Asia. At the same time, two political and commercial mechanisms consolidated the transnational interactions between the East and the West in general and between East Asia and Southeast Asia in particular. These were the Tributary System

with regard to Sino-Southeast Asia relations, and the Dutch and British East Indies Companies and the junk trade (*da fanchuan maoyi* - 大帆船贸易) with respect to Europe-Southeast Asia interactions. These are the contexts and frameworks that characterized the early maritime Chinese diaspora in Nanyang, a subject that should be better understood from the perspective of West-East relationships in general and of monsoon Asian interactions in particular.

From the perspective of Chinese migration history, the period under study coincided with the first wave of Chinese migration that lasted over three and half centuries until the mid-1850s (庄国土/Zhuang Guotu, 2008). The dynamics of Chinese migration were driven by trade and commerce, and the diaspora featured overwhelmingly the merchants and artisans (*Huashang* - 华商), in sharp contrast with “the coolie pattern” (*Huagong* - 华工) in the following wave of Chinese migration (Wang, G.W., 1989: 33-48). Yet in the eyes of the Chinese government, the image of the emigrant Chinese was nothing but negative. For more than four centuries during the Ming and early Qing dynasties, Chinese emigrants were regarded as “deserters”, “criminals”, and “potential traitors”. This perception persisted until the period of the Opium Wars (see Yen, 1981). Helpless migrant Chinese could only look upon themselves as “overseas orphans”. It is not without reason that contemporary Chinese communities overseas reject the old notion of “Overseas Chinese” and opt for the more acceptable notion as embedded in the term “Chinese diaspora”.

Conclusion

In the historical process of globalization, the oceans and seas had been crucial platforms on which transnational interactions were enacted. The oceans, seas, and ports functioned as linkages to connect the continents, regions, and states as they themselves developed into key “in-between” frontiers. Southeast Asia or Nanyang emerged as an in-between region linking not only the West and East, but also South and East Asia, and thus rendering maritime or monsoon Asia into a coherent geographical entity. It was international trade and migration that effectively linked together the formerly isolated worlds of the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, China Seas, and the Pacific (Mettele, 2008: 228-230). In the making of the Chinese diaspora, it was the ports, routes, and communities that served as the interconnected structural components that contributed to the making of the sprawling territories in maritime or monsoon Asia into a functional region. The ports are located on both sides of the water frontiers that separated China and Nanyang, and in turn connected by the routes of migration and trade. Chinese communities clustered and emerged around the trading ports as they evolved in a spontaneous process of mutual reinforcement. The key players in the making of the Chinese diaspora were the merchants who initiated and managed communities of their own and contributed to the development of trade through their drive and unrelenting enterprise.

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