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*Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia*, edited by Eric Tagliacozzo and Wen-Chin Chang. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 534 pages. (Paperback ISBN 978-0-8223-4903-7).\*

Trade between China and Southeast Asia is of great antiquity, yet its history is hard to trace beyond a few centuries. Cross-border trade does not command a high place in national histories and is often mentioned “in passing” to add a touch of glory to an enlightened rule or a “golden age.” There is much about regional trade that remains to be studied by historians and area specialists.

Once in a while some ground-breaking efforts on regional studies are carried out to cheer the hearts of the specialists and general readers. *Chinese Circulations* falls into this mould and contributes significantly to the unravelling of the multifaceted maritime and overland trade and exchanges between China and Southeast Asia during the past few centuries. Comprising 20 essays and a Foreword by Professor Wang Gungwu, the book is the fruitful end to two workshops in 2005 and 2007 and the meticulous efforts of the editors. These are not the run-of-the-mill workshop proceedings that are hastily produced to justify the event but are meant to make a “signal contribution” to the field of Chinese trade and commerce in Southeast Asia.

Many of the contributors have completed years of research and scholarly writing on Southeast Asia. They have accessed vast stores of reference materials from national and local archives and conducted field research and interviews. Each study is based on efforts to piece together sources both official and “community based” to offer refreshing perspectives on a range of largely neglected and overlooked topics.

The editors go the extra mile to provide an introductory chapter to review Chinese trade, networks, and commodities to place the study in theoretical and historical perspectives. The rest of the book is divided into four parts, headed by one on theoretical aspects and the rest arranged chronologically. The commodities that receive attention are diverse, ranging from the essential to the rare and exotic as well as books and the Bible and nonphysical items such as labour and capital.

For centuries China was the primary market for many commodities from Southeast Asia, and the trade in most of these commodities has persisted until today. Chinese cultural habits and spontaneous demand have turned many items into highly sought after “commodities.” It is largely in the context of Chinese cultural values that “exotic” items acquired monetary value.

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Burmese jade, Sarawak birds' nests, and marine products such as *trepang* (sea slugs) are cases in point. The Burmese jade industry was made possible by the demand from China, but how and to what extent this demand is related to the economic growth of Burma are left unsaid. The Western-inspired trade in opium spawned a thriving business throughout Southeast Asia. It was extensively distributed through revenue farms that effectively collected an indirect tax on the Chinese on behalf of colonial governments. It also allowed Chinese revenue farmers to accumulate capital to branch out into emerging industries. In mining, it was Chinese labour and enterprise in the pioneer frontiers that drew rival colonial powers into Malaya, Bangka, and West Borneo.

The common perception of the Chinese as "middlemen" is now seen to be too simplistic to justify their complex roles in the economic life of Southeast Asia. From the very beginning, the Chinese offered not just their labour as a "commodity" but, more important, their "spirit" of self-advancement, enterprise, and social behaviour grounded in core cultural values as well as their skills in capital accumulation and business networking. They have therefore been able to create new avenues of business and trade often in uncertain and hazardous circumstances. It was not smooth sailing for the Chinese who chose to venture into Southeast Asia. Before or during colonial rule, they were exposed to risks to life and property to a variety of hazards such as diseases and lawless social environments. Despite being indispensable "agents" for colonial enrichment, they could incur official discrimination if they were seen to be a source of threat to colonial interests. Worse still, they could be driven away, banned, or, on several occasions, even massacred. Each setback, however, saw their revival through their inner strength of resilience and spirit of self-advancement.

Chinese economic activities in Southeast Asia were and still are inseparable from intricate "networks" based on clan and village affinities and personal ties with local chiefs and administrators. While geographical proximity allowed Yunnanese to dominate trade with Burma, it was other factors that worked elsewhere. The "early bird" ventures by those sharing clan and village affinities tended to encourage their kinsmen into a trade or a locality. The Fujianese who dominated the rice milling trade in Malaya also controlled a major share in the purchase, milling, and export of rubber. The Hakkas seemed to be drawn into mining and were often among the earliest Chinese to do so, as in Pulai in Malaya or in the tin fields of Bangka and Malaya and the gold fields of West Borneo. The dynamics of various forms of affinity in the formation of dialect niches are not given much attention but are worthy of further study.

Maritime Southeast Asian trade was conducted in the large number of regional and local ports. Reference to the roles of Manila and Singapore and local ports as well as Canton and Amoy are scattered in different pages that deal briefly with their roles in trade and circulations. Ports flourished or languished, and restrictive regulations and competition and the diversion of



Chinese trade could bring about the decline of ports. It would be of interest if one of the ports was singled out for special study. The port-catchment nexus at the local level, when treated in some detail, also yields insights into the intricate patterns and nature of the flows of capital, credit, or goods in exchange for supplies of items and the networks of contacts that helped enhance competitiveness.

Collectively, the essays add scope and depth to the study of Chinese economic links and ventures in Southeast Asia in selected historical periods. By examining the dynamics that drove the trade in selected commodities, the study uncovers new strands in the complex fabric of economic and social networks peculiar to each commodity. The analyses and discussions are certain to prove useful to specialists and general readers.

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