THE ARC OF HISTORICAL COMMERCIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

——— Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo

Theoretical Review

Chinese merchants have been trading down to Southeast Asia for centuries, sojourning—and sometimes settling—during the course of their voyages. These ventures have taken place by land and by sea, linking the wider orbit of the Chinese homeland with vast stretches of Southeast Asia in a broad, mercantile embrace. The present volume aims to examine these contacts, transactions, and transmissions over what the great French historian Fernand Braudel called the longue durée. Despite the presence of several foundational volumes by Wang Gungwu and others, which have charted the directions of this field of study over the past several decades, the field of Chinese trade in Southeast Asia has become so large and so complex that a syncretic book on its parameters seems long overdue. We hope to build on past achievements and outline the scope, diversity, and complexity of Chinese trade interactions over a vast geography and an equally broad temporal spectrum. Because the languages, archives, and sources needed to master a task such as this are beyond the grasp of any one person, we hope that this book will make a signal contribution to the field, in summarizing where our knowledge now stands and where future directions of research may wish to go.

The idea of networks as being crucial to the linking of human societies has received much attention in the past several decades. Philip Curtin was among the first to point this out in his broad and wide-ranging study Cross-Cultural Trade in World History. In that book, he linked the Phoenicians of Mediterranean antiquity, the Hanseatic merchants of the early-modern Baltic, and Bugis traders of modern Indonesia in a single, coherent narrative, showing how merchant diasporas could be analyzed with theoretical rigor
over the centuries. Scholars brought this global vantage down to a regional scope, such as Christine Dobbin in her fascinating Asian Entrepreneurial Minorities: Conjoint Communities in the Indian Ocean. Where Curtin saw “types” of ethnicized commercial ventures, Dobbin stressed communities, borrowing a page out of Tönnies and the Frankfurt school of sociology. To bring this line of thinking even closer to the subject of this volume, Aihwa Ong’s recent work has also shown how ideas of traveling subjects—often involved in trade—can be seen as crucial transnational actors in the making of political economies. Ong’s focus on the Chinese in this respect brought a new theoretical sophistication to the idea of including Asians in Western social-science paradigms involving diaspora, a much-needed corrective that has subsequently received huge attention in the literature.

Merchants transport products, not just themselves, over vast distances of mountains, deserts, or seas, so an analysis of commodities—and not just the networks that carry them—is also a vital part of this volume. Here again, recent social-science research, particularly by scholars such as Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, is crucial to our aims. Appadurai and Kopytoff have spoken of the social histories and cultural biographies of “things.” According to Appadurai, commodities are like persons; they have social lives and move in and out of different regimes of value in discrete space and time. The “total trajectory” of commodities—that is, from the course of their production, through their exchange and distribution, to their eventual consumption—involves different stages, and is enmeshed in complex intersections of economic, political, and cultural factors. We have endeavored in this book to foreground the commodities themselves that have linked China and Southeast Asia over the centuries, at least as much as the actors who have transported them. For the present study, these commodities include a bewildering array of objects, and many of them—including books and other forms of traveling print, human labor, fish (dried and fresh), and jade stones—have not been thoroughly explored in existing studies on this part of the world.

Chinese merchants have been involved in the transit of most “things,” historically, between Southeast Asia and the Chinese mainland, and it is difficult to find any single line of trade where they have not played a part, in some form or another. Yet linking a great variety of trades over a long period of time and even wider geographies is a very tall order. Nevertheless this is one of the primary aims of this volume. How similar were the dynamics of these ventures, and how different? Are there mechanics or dynamics of the trades that we can point to as being analogous? Does our vantage of analysis shift if we make the commodities themselves as important as the
people carrying them, or is this altering of locus irrelevant? We have asked each scholar in the volume to highlight one particular commodity or class of commodities, in addition to a period of time or a proscribed geography, so that we might see what comparative insights might be achieved by bringing these essays together in one coherent study.

This volume, by its very scope, also fits into a wider general debate over the nature of Chinese trade and capital over the past several centuries. Max Weber and Karl Marx were foundational in these debates more than a century ago, but since that time ideas on how to study Chinese economic structures and particularities—especially as part of regional or transregional units—have changed. G. William Skinner made an impressive contribution in this respect in the 1960s and 1970s, and he was later joined by a coterie of scholars—including Mark Elvin, Philip Huang, Peter Purdue, R. Bin Wong, and Ken Pomeranz—in trying to decipher how Chinese market mechanisms have worked over time. Much of this discussion has focused on rural macroregions, but with the more recent work of Sherman Cochran on Shanghai and William Rowe on Hankow, among others, an urban component has emerged in these discussions as well.

One of the issues at stake, in fact, is whether there has been any such thing as “capitalism” or “Chinese capitalism” in the passage of Chinese history, and if so, when these processes started, and what forms they may have taken. Terence Gomez and Michael Hsiao, again among other scholars, have critiqued essentializations of the cultural aspects of Chinese business-networking, showing how these patterns have been both similar to and different from Western variants. Other scholars, such as Timothy Brook and Gregory Blue in a particularly useful volume on the historical period, and Gary Hamilton in a more contemporary era, have questioned capitalism’s place in a Chinese context, both as a historical reality in a proscribed time and place and as a useful concept altogether. David Faure has even attempted to connect freewheeling notions of Chinese-style “capitalism” and family/business enterprise into a single, concerted whole in his treatment of the topic. These analyses tend to be sociological or economic in nature, but scholars such as Philip Kuhn have shown that they can be human stories as well, with an emphasis on the lived experience of actual human beings. All of these studies have brought an impressive edifice of data, interpretation, and methodology to bear in helping us think about how these Chinese merchant connections have stretched from China itself to a variety of landscapes (Southeast Asian and otherwise) into the wider world.
The Shape of the Volume
THEORETICAL AND PRECOLONIAL VANTAGES

In bringing together twenty scholars, we have hoped, among other things, to achieve a blending of generations: scholars whose shoulders we all stand on now; mid-level professors who are now beginning to shape this field; and younger scholars who will follow new avenues of inquiry in the years to come. Anthony Reid opens the volume with an essay entitled “Chinese on the Mining Frontier in Southeast Asia,” which is inclusive of the region as a whole. Reid argues that Chinese technologies of mining and metalworking have been influential in Southeast Asia at least since Dong-Son times, stretching far back into the region’s antiquity. Since Sung times, and probably long before, iron and bronze artifacts were imported to Southeast Asia from China because larger-scale Chinese methods of extraction and manufacture could produce them more cheaply. Reid points out that Chinese miners and metalworkers no doubt interacted with Vietnam over a longer period, but began to travel southward by sea from the Mongol period. His essay examines what little we know about these early interactions, but necessarily focuses on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Chinese miners revolutionized the Southeast Asian tin industry.14

In a similarly encompassing essay, titled “Cotton, Copper, and Caravans: Trade and the Transformation of Southwest China,” C. Patterson Giersch picks up the longue durée thread laid down by Reid. Giersch examines the overland trade of two commodities, copper and cotton, which dominated Yunnan Province’s early modern trade with both Southeast Asia and eastern China. Giersch asserts that previous work on the caravan trade and mining has challenged accepted economic-geography paradigms that divide Southeast Asia from China, and has demonstrated how Southwest China’s commercialization produced profound economic and political transformations in Southeast Asia as well. His essay builds on past scholarly accomplishments by explaining how Chinese merchants organized long-distance trade across rugged terrain, and how this contributed to profound, long-term transformations in Yunnan’s society and economy. More specifically, Giersch argues that the changing nature of long-distance trade over the longue durée was linked to broad patterns of migration, urbanization, and economic development across much of what now constitutes Yunnan Province proper.15

Adam McKeown likewise takes a wide-angled approach with his essay, “The Social Life of Chinese Labor.” McKeown suggests that labor can easily be understood as a commodity; a person may sell or lease his own labor, and
merchants may also profit from the organization and sale of other people and their labor. The conceptualization and historiography of labor as a commodity, however, presents several difficulties, especially with regard to Chinese migrant labor. The radical polarization between freedom and slavery that has shaped the understanding of labor and migration since the abolition of African slavery has made it difficult to understand the many forms of obligation, control, and private organization that fall between these poles. McKeown argues that much understanding of Chinese migration can still be traced to categories established in the extensive debates surrounding the “coolie trade” from the 1840s to 1880s. He therefore problematizes the debate in his own essay, arguing for a new and more syncretic understanding of the position of Chinese human beings in forging the links between places like China and Southeast Asia.16

Carl A. Trocki follows this approach in his essay, “Opium as a Commodity in the Chinese Nanyang Trade,” offering a periodization of the rise and decline of opium as a key element in the Chinese economy of the Nanyang. He focuses primarily on the role of opium revenue farming, and looks at the changing importance of these institutions in the region. Trocki argues that opium as a commodity in the Chinese trade of Southeast Asia can be traced through three relatively distinct phases. The first lasted from about 1760 to 1820; during these years opium was traded much like any other commodity, throughout the region and to China itself. Between 1820 and 1880, the revenue farms grew in value and influence. An interdependence developed between opium, labor, commodity production, and Chinese capital, which agglomerated around the farming system. After 1880, the farms grew beyond their local economic bases and became large international syndicates. Groups of investors from the various capitals of the region sought to build syndicates controlling the flow of opium to many major settlements. By 1915, even though Chinese workers continued to be among the most important opium consumers, opium processing and retail distribution were both taken over by colonial states.17

The second section of the volume focuses on the precolonial interactions between China and Southeast Asia. Takeshi Hamashita opens this part by focusing attention on the Lidai Baoan (the precious documents of successive generations of the Ryukyu Kingdom). This is a compilation of several large volumes of documents, written in Chinese with some inflection of local Fujian dialect, relating to Ryukyuan contacts with China and eight Southeast Asian countries (or, more exactly, port towns), covering the period from 1424 to 1867. The eight Southeast Asian locations include Siam, Melaka,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/Time Period</th>
<th>Commodity</th>
<th>Geography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I. THEORETICAL/LONGUE DURÉE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Reid</td>
<td>precious metals</td>
<td>Pan–Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Patterson Giersch</td>
<td>cotton and copper</td>
<td>China and mainland Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam McKeown</td>
<td>labor</td>
<td>China and Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl A. Trocki</td>
<td>opium</td>
<td>Pan–Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II. PRECOLONIAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takeshi Hamashita</td>
<td>pepper and sappanwood</td>
<td>South China Sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li Tana</td>
<td>coins</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masuda Erika</td>
<td>luxury goods</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Sutherland</td>
<td>tortoiseshell</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III. EARLY COLONIAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun Laicheng</td>
<td>gems</td>
<td>Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard Blussé</td>
<td>junk cargoes</td>
<td>Java</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucille Chia</td>
<td>books</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwee Hui Kian</td>
<td>textiles</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV. HIGH COLONIAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man-houng Lin</td>
<td>capital</td>
<td>Taiwan, South China, and Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu Xiao An</td>
<td>rice</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nola Cooke</td>
<td>fish</td>
<td>Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean DeBernardi</td>
<td>Bibles</td>
<td>China and Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>V. POSTCOLONIAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bien Chiang</td>
<td>birds' nests</td>
<td>Sarawak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Tagliacozzo</td>
<td>marine products</td>
<td>Coastal Southeast Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wen-Chin Chang</td>
<td>jade stones</td>
<td>Burma and Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Woods</td>
<td>timber</td>
<td>Burma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hamashita’s essay examines the role of the Ryukyu tributary trade network with Fujian merchants’ networks in East and Southeast Asia, concentrating particularly on the pepper and sappanwood trades. In many ways, it is a specific commodity history of the South China Sea in miniature.

Li Tana then picks up the precolonial thread in her essay, “Cochinchinese Coin Casting and Circulating in Eighteenth-Century Southeast Asia.” Li argues that while much has been said about Chinese business networks in modern Southeast Asia, little is known about the coins they used in these ports and about the origins of the coins. Locating the coin business in a regional trade system, Li’s essay explores the links of the coin business between eighteenth-century China and Southeast Asia, and particularly between the different ports of Southeast Asia. The evidence she introduces suggests that there were much closer connections than previously supposed in this important branch of Chinese business, namely between mining in Tongkin, copper and zinc importing from Japan and China, and coin-casting in Cochinchina. These coins eventually circulated on to neighboring polities as well, such as Siam and even inland to landlocked Laos. 

Masuda Erika extends the vision of precolonial interactions between Southeast Asia and China in her essay, “Import of Prosperity: Luxurious Items Imported from China to Siam during the Thonburi and Early Rattanakosin Periods (1767–1854).” Masuda argues that previous studies on the rise and fall of the Sino-Siamese junk trade demonstrated that after the trade reached its peak in the early 1830s, it gradually declined, with Siam being keenly aware of this decay. These studies, Masuda asserts, give the misleading impression that Siam abruptly stopped paying attention to China, and that the latter disappeared entirely from the former’s external perspective. However, she continues, Siamese documents indicate that the degradation of China’s political prestige due to the opium war and the loss of trading privileges in Guangzhou under the tributary system did not change the prosperous image China held in Siam, nor did it affect the image of Guangzhou as a desirable outlet for commerce. Masuda emphasizes the Siamese ruling class’s continuing appetite for luxurious or ornamental items imported from China to Siam during the early Rattanakosin period. She also emphasizes how these items were enjoyed by the Siamese ruling class, and often embellished and justified Siamese monarchs’ claims to royal power.

Adopting a commodity-chain approach, Heather Sutherland also makes a case for continuity in her stimulating essay, “A Sino-Indonesian Commodity Chain: The Trade in Tortoiseshell in the Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth
Centuries.” Sutherland argues that during the seventeenth-century Chinese consumption of trepang (bêche-de-mer, or edible sea cucumbers) increased, so much so that early-eighteenth-century Makassar emerged as a transit port for this new commodity, enabling it to become again a center of regional commercial networks after a hiatus of many decades. At first trepang was sent through intermediate ports (especially Batavia), but during the second half of the eighteenth century Makassar was allowed a direct junk link to Xiamen in South China. In fact, in the 1770s Xiamen passed even the colonial Dutch capital of Batavia as Makassar’s main trading partner. If in the 1720s Makassar’s most valuable imports and exports were Indian textiles and rice, by the 1780s they were both trepang. China was always the principal market for this highly profitable cargo, Sutherland argues, and eagerly sought out a continuing, stable supply of the shells.21

Colonial and Postcolonial Vantages

In the early colonial period, some of these patterns of interaction began to change. One of the best places to examine these echoes is in the upland frontier areas separating mainland Southeast Asia and Southwest China. Sun Laichen focuses on the gem trade between Ming and Qing China and Burma to the south. He explores the changes in and continuities of gem trade from the Ming into the Qing, looking in particular into the development of Chinese terminologies related to specific precious stones. He points out that rubies and sapphires (called baoshi 寶石 in Chinese) dominated the flow of gems into Ming China, whereas during the Qing, especially from the eighteenth century onward, Burmese jadeite (feicui 翡翠) overtook baoshi as the most popular gemstone. This shift of fashion resulted in the booming of jade mine excavation in the Kachin state of Burma. The history of jade commerce thus effectively demonstrates how China’s demand helped drive economic and political changes in Southeast Asian history, particularly along this one landlocked frontier.22

Complementing Sun’s work in the maritime corridors of Asia is Leonard Blussé’s essay, “Junks to Java: Chinese Shipping to the Nanyang in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century.” Blussé points out that there is almost no quantitative research on the import and export cargoes of the junks that plied between the “primate city” of Batavia and Southeastern China, apart from the more qualitative studies on sea products such as bêche-de-mer, shark fins, and delicacies like edible birds’ nests. Blussé has made a long-term project of collecting from archival sources any available quantitative ma-
terial about the cargoes of individual junks or series of junks. He argues for the vast importance of this subject given that the junk trade formed a metaphorical umbilical cord between Southeast China and overseas Chinese port towns. Taken together, Sun’s and Blussé’s essays provide a fascinating overview of early modern relationships as they were acted out between China and Southeast Asia over the course of the eighteenth century and beyond, both by land and by sea.23

Lucille Chia draws attention to the striking fact that very little Chinese culture was introduced through print to local societies before the nineteenth century, while many other cultural elements diffused into Southeast Asia following the arrival of both humans and goods from China. In spite of this centuries-long paucity in print was the anomalous appearance of Chinese books in the early Spanish Philippines. These books were largely religious in nature, reflecting the efforts of Spanish missionaries to proselytize the Chinese in the Philippines. The success of these campaigns, Chia argues, often turned both the Chinese and local Filipinos away from their native cultures. Later, when the printing of books in Chinese and Chinese works in translation gained a foothold in Southeast Asia, following large-scale arrivals of Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century, the Philippines was the country in the region the least receptive to establishing a long-term Chinese publishing tradition.24

Following these paradigms even further south, to the nascent Dutch East Indies, Kwee Hui Kian examines the place of Chinese merchants in the trade of South Asian textiles. She argues that the consumption of Indian textiles in the Indonesian archipelago was dependent on the competitiveness of the price and quality of the commodity relative to those produced locally in the region. When the prices of Indian textiles were driven up by increasing European demand during the late seventeenth century, island Southeast Asians turned to regional sourcing to procure higher quality, cheaper textiles. The decrease in the demand for the Indian product within the Indonesian archipelago was therefore primarily a factor of the region’s resourcefulness, rather than a sign of its economic decline. Kwee shows the vital place of Chinese merchants in these processes, especially in the warp and weft of the early colonial period, when it was by no means clear who would be controlling the future of this profitable line of commerce.25

As we move into the high-colonial period of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the essays in this volume increasingly emphasize the role of capital in binding Chinese trade networks between China and South-
Man-houng Lin examines these processes by exploring the role of cultural ties in the shaping of economic networks. Lin focuses specifically on Taiwanese merchants’ overseas business relations with South China, Southeast Asia, and Manchuria during the period of Japanese colonial rule. She first explores the power of cultural ties that contributed to Taiwanese traders’ high investment in South Fujian and north Guangdong provinces, where most Taiwanese immigrants’ families had originally come from, several generations back. Southeast Asia was also very important to the interests of Taiwanese traders because they knew overseas Chinese there shared common cultural backgrounds and ties to the southeastern coasts of China proper. Manchuria, which did not share these cultural links, ranked last in Taiwanese traders’ estimations. However, following Japan’s growing political and economic influence in Manchuria after Manchukuo was established, in 1932, Taiwanese traders’ investments there grew substantially. This shift was further stimulated by other factors, such as the benefit Taiwan derived from a regional division of labor with Manchuria. As this case study suggests, economic comparative advantage can trump cultural ties in economic engagement, which, Lin argues, disproves culture-based concepts, such as the “Greater China Economic Zone” and the idea of a “global Chinese network.”

Wu Xiao An agrees with Carl Trocki that, as was the case with the opium business, commercialization of the rice industry in Southeast Asia was tied through Chinese traders to the global capitalist economy. This was true both in terms of production and consumption, as all of these products were closely related to the larger colonial tin, rubber, and other cash-cropping economies. Wu shows that prior to the Second World War, British Malaya depended primarily on imports of rice, comprising over 60 percent of the colony’s total consumption. The rice trade in British Malaya was largely monopolized by Chinese merchants (mostly Hokkien and Teochieu), who formed close-knit trading networks through credit, kinship, and guild associations. Another pattern of rice trading that concerns Wu is the local rice-milling economy in northern Malaya, a case study of Chinese trade in the region that Wu is able to explore in some detail.

Nola Cooke focuses on a different industry: the Chinese contribution to fish farming in Cambodia in the high-colonial period. In certain respects, Chinese (and Sino-Khmer) commodity production in nineteenth-century Cambodia remained remarkably unchanged by the advent of French colonial protection, in 1863. Along the major rivers, Cooke argues, Chinese agri-
culturalists continued to rent the most fertile river banks and islands from the Cambodian king, and to plant them with a variety of cash crops which included indigo, tobacco, and cotton. Chinese (and Vietnamese) junk traders continued to transport these products downriver to the markets of Cochin-china. The most important change to occur in commodity production, however, involved the fishing industry, especially on Tonle Sap, the Great Lake. Where this activity had involved all resident ethnic groups in the first half of the century and produced relatively small catches, by the 1890s a major industry had emerged. This industry was overwhelmingly run by Chinese and Vietnamese, and its produce was exported to markets in coastal China and much of Southeast Asia. Cooke’s paper examines how this fishing industry developed and, by the 1890s, assumed the form that would persist throughout the colonial era.28

The last essay in the high-colonial rubric focuses on Singapore and its connections with China. Jean DeBernardi uncovers a rather unexpected link between these two places: the commodity of a single book, the Bible. DeBernardi argues that evangelical Protestant Christians, excited and perhaps even compelled by the challenge posed by China’s enormous population, aspired to distribute the Bible to every living person in the Middle Kingdom. With this in mind, in 1815 the London Missionary Society launched an important program of Chinese translation and printing in Southeast Asia under the umbrella of colonial rule. DeBernardi traces the history of Chinese and Southeast Asian Bible production and transmission since that time, with an emphasis on the high-colonial years, when records for this practice became particularly important. She also makes use of ethnographic research to bring this study into the present, linking history and anthropology in novel and interesting ways along the way.29

The last section of the volume deals with postcolonial developments and connections in the binding of China and Southeast Asia through the trade in various “commodities.” Bien Chiang explores the trade of edible birds’ nests in Sarawak to Chinese consumer markets back in China. He reviews the Chinese medicinal tradition, which contains a hierarchy of birds’ nest categories and has triggered a huge demand for this commodity among Chinese consumers, resulting in the formation of a lucrative circum-South China Sea birds’ nest market. Chiang discusses the interactions between Chinese traders and indigenous communities in Sarawak, pointing out that local people are not just passive workers exploited by these same Chinese merchants, but instead carve out a share, as well as a career, for themselves,
by working as collectors and guardsmen in the caves where birds’ nests are found.30

Continuing the emphasis on natural, environmental produce, Eric Taglia-
cozzo investigates the marine-products trade between East and Southeast
Asia. His essay draws on oral-history work completed among wholesalers,
retailers, and fishing communities throughout coastal Southeast Asia, and
is backed up with interviews conducted in the “Chinese core” areas of Hong
Kong, China, and Taiwan as well. He argues that this trade, one of the oldest
of the commercial linkages between China and Southeast Asia, is still vital
and important, despite having gone through a number of changes over time.
It has acquired regional variations in hierarchy and function that are readily
apparent.31

Wen-Chin Chang then orients our vantage to the mountains of main-
land Southeast Asia, where she has been tracing legal and illegal jade net-
works among migrant Yunnanese Chinese through ethnographic research.
Her essay looks into Yunnanese migration and resettlement in Thailand and
Burma, these peoples’ interaction with state agents and other ethnic com-
munities, and mining and trading regulations, as well as the operation of
capital flows in the region. She argues that a state-centered slant must be
avoided in order to obtain real insights into the traders’ economic dyna-
mism, beyond the restrictions imposed by area regimes. Employing a non-
state perspective, she analyzes contemporary field data as well as relevant
historical sources to illustrate the intertwining of historical contingency and
continuity in this particular underground transnational business.32

Finally Kevin Woods, an NGO worker embedded in Chiang Mai, takes a
global commodity chain approach by looking at another “liminal” product:
the timber trade in Burma (Myanmar), much of it carried through ethnically
Chinese hands. Northern Burma, Kevin Woods argues, has played an impor-
tant role in Southeast Asian regional trading for the past millennium, which
has relied on natural-resource wealth and the control of strategic border
checkpoints passing from landlocked Yunnan into mainland Southeast Asia,
even on to India. Using the case of the timber economy along the China-
Burma border today, Woods traces the connections of the three successive
nodes of this commodity trade. The first node is timber production in the
Kachin state of Upper Burma; the second node is that of procession, con-
trolled by Chinese merchants along the China-Burma border, to Shanghai,
Guangdong, and Hong Kong; and the third node is consumption of this ille-
gal timber in different parts of the world. This case study reveals the violence
of the insurgent economy in Burma, the role of Chinese merchants in this trade, and the erasure of the violence at the consumption end of this many-miles-long process.

Charting Directions

The field of Sino-Southeast Asian Studies is now so large and complex that a synthesis of information, ideas, and approaches seems highly desirable. Sources have become available that were previously inaccessible, and disciplinary boundaries have begun to be crossed, as interpreters of this academic field strive to stretch the bounds of what is knowable about Chinese movements in Southeast Asia, both historically and today. The languages in this volume alone include Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai, Burmese, Malay, and Indonesian—and that covers only the Asian languages, leaving out Western scholarship (read here in English, French, Spanish, and Dutch). Because no single scholar can hope to know all of these languages, let alone the geographies, time periods, and most important, the varied contexts of Chinese trade in the Nanyang, bringing these essays together to see what they can tell us as a collective seems like a very good idea. As a group, they elucidate the hardship, toil, failure, and success of Chinese merchant ventures into Southeast Asia, both in the now darkening glow of past centuries and in our own ethnographic present, as several of the later contributions clearly show.

Chinese merchants have not been alone in the Nanyang; they were joined by Indians, Arabs, Parsees, Armenians, and Jews, all conducting their own commerce and often along their own commercial lines. Equally often these diasporas have found cause to work together. It is conceivable that companion volumes to this one might usefully appear on any one (or all) of these other merchant diasporas, and the products they transited between Southeast Asia and other lands. A start has been made toward that goal already. Ravi Shankar, for example, has written on the Tamil Muslim connections between South India and Southeast Asia (particularly Malaysia and Singapore), and David Rudner has concentrated on the merchant caste known as “Chettiars” specifically in this context.33 Gene Ammarell has looked at Bugis networks in a similar vein, using an anthropological lens, while Christian Pelras has done the same from a historical vantage.34 The connections, both actual and conceptual, between Jewish trading networks (mostly in Europe) and Chinese merchant diasporas (mostly in Southeast Asia) have been problematized by Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid to very good effect,
for thinking about how these processes work both in cross-cultural and in comparative terms across large swaths of the earth.\textsuperscript{35}

We hope that this volume will provide a broad and wide-ranging perspective on these mercantile processes, elucidating not only the dynamics and mechanics of the Chinese as a merchant diaspora far from home, but also the workings of one group among many engaged in the pursuit of commerce in lands not originally their own. Taking seriously the conjuncture of geography, temporality, and the commodities themselves, this book asks how merchant diasporas operate, both actually and conceptually over long periods of time. As such, we hope it contributes to the ever-deepening field of Chinese studies overseas, but also to the critique and analysis of globalization as this has happened in past centuries, and in our own lifetime. That lofty goal is one of the signal aims of this book.

Notes


6. Ayurvedic medicines from India might be one of these lines; the transit of Korans from the Middle East to Southeast Asia might be another.
12. David Faure, China and Capitalism: A History of Business Enterprise in Modern China (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006).
15. See also C. Patterson Giersch, Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China’s Yunnan Frontier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).


24. See also Lucille Chia, Printing for Profit: The Commercial Publishers of Jianyang, Fujian (Eleventh–Seventeenth Centuries) (Cambridge: Center for Harvard-Yenching Institute, Harvard University Asia, 2002).


16 WEN-CHEM CHANG AND ERIC TAGLIACOZZO